



bigrobtheactor

Volume III

Robert Israel Kabakoff

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*Dedicated to the loving memory of my blessed
grandmother Sylvia Jamison, with a little help from the
very wise, Winston Smith and Socrates.*

Preface

Posit ‘free will’ as axiomatic, thus a tale is told. It may be the case that when taken at first glance, these three extensive volumes appear as an exercise in obsessive narcissistic ideation, they are not. They are simply an exercise in answering the basic existential question, hypothetical or otherwise, for better and worse, posed by the Great Haymaker in the Sky: *“I gave you life. What have you done with it?”* Of course, not every tale has been told, common sense suggests omissions, *“a time for every purpose under Heaven”* sort of thinking.

Presumably, there will be time for fuller disclosure once that question is asked. Otherwise, what we see is what we get, and I have been as truthful and as accurate as memory and discretion allow, and with that, an examination and validation on the record is my aim. This is who I am, this is what I did, and on that modest note, this is the final word.

Robert I. Kabakoff, Jomtien Beach, Siam, August 26, 2024

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CHAPTER I: “*Be Lively*”



“*Be lively*,” thus sprach Konisberg, the director, standing real close, inches behind me, whispering close, in a very crowded, dimly lit club party room, now an energized film set populated with at least one hundred film ‘*extras*’ cast as party-goers and club staff, and the principal cast, along with the techies, art department, wardrobe, hair and makeup people, a couple of teamsters, and the production crew—a small army of pros. Today was day three of reshoots, very, very expensive reshoots, privately funded, long days, lotsa’ union overtime, nobody stressin’ it, so, despite the apparent availability of ample funding, there was pressure to get things right on the first take for the great American auteur. Everyone’s on ‘A game’, that’s a part of what great directors do, they call it forth. Leaning in so he could speak quietly,

gently, just above a whisper in a matter-of-fact tone, Allan Stewart Konigsberg from south Brooklyn, my hometown turf, Woody Allen was directing me in his film “*Celebrity*” (1998). I could hardly believe it was happening, that this was real, I'm alive, this is not a dream, I'm even getting paid, it's a professional gig, a Screen Actors Guild ‘background actor’ gig, I actually belong here, worked hard all on my own to get here, starting from sub-zero basement, now on the first floor, committed myself to the life years before, here today on this set placed and directed by a childhood hero, a man up on the big screen making everybody laugh, and brilliantly, even the slapstick. All that was enough of a challenge to process, the surreality of a film-set where everything is only half real, enhancing the sense of surreality of my life and the moment, let alone managing to get my cues and actions right at “*rolling... rolling... Action!*” time.

Directors don't usually deal with background actors, almost never, that's what they have first ADs, second ADs, second seconds and PAs for, a chain-of-command, but the *Woodman* is a stickler, he approved each one of us for the scene a week or so before, when hundreds of prospective performers and participants stood in line around the block for hours just for a chance to possibly, maybe—but probably not—make the scene. Finally, standing in front of him and his aides in the compact, windowless room used on location for casting, I set my headshot down on the desktop and made brief eye contact (*Hey, brother, it's me, a fellow Brooklynite of the Hebrew*

persuasion. Put me in the game, coach. I wanna play!), making sure my gold Star of David necklace charm was visible, channeling a Broadway Danny Rose vibe. “*Yeah, Lou, a definite type o’ situation.*”

It wasn’t that complicated; there would be no rehearsal. We were supposed to be pros, especially the union members. No one was selected at random; it’s understood. He was pointing across the temporarily vacated dance floor, surrounded by the entire company just out of frame, to the bar where three dressed-to-the-nines, hot-looking young black chicks were standing, ready to play their roles—casually receiving me. They were another three well-placed, ‘*featured*’ extras. A featured spot is a rare thing and about as good as it gets in the ‘*background*’ world. If all goes well in that tiny moment when it’s all about you—for example, giving that perfect reaction shot the whole plot hinges on—it better go just right, else for sure it’s a B-line to the editing room floor and Palukaville. Otherwise, if all goes well, as it sometimes does, you just may be able to sit in the cool darkness of a spacious theater with your special someone, point up at the screen, and proudly announce for the next three rows, “*That’s me!*”

There’s a funny thing that happens on American film sets, a vagary that no one ever talks about and never gets corrected, and because of that, it is repeated and repeated until it becomes deeply ingrained into the subliminal fabric of the event, wherein the vagary continues as though it were now

deliberate. The vagary sets in with the final two calls before the camera starts rolling. The first cue being ‘*First positions!*’ or ‘*Back to one (top of shot), we’re goin’ again*’ called out by the ADs and echoed by the PAs, followed by ‘*last looks*’ (an alert to the department heads and their teams to check that everything is as intended and the set is ‘locked up’). Next, the next four: ‘*Sound speed, camera rolling, background,*’ followed by the final call to ‘*Action!*’ The vagueness lies somewhere between the calls *background* and *action*. *Background* —as it was originally intended—was probably supposed to be the call that told the ‘extras’ to begin their action, movement, or pantomime dialogue, both, whatever, but all that before the camera is actually rolling so there is no pause or lag once the camera is rolling, and *Action* of course is for everyone else, including and most importantly the principal actors and camera team. That’s when they start shooting, and all departments are humming. Again, the background talent is already supposed to be engaged and in motion, but it never happens. Instead, they remain fixed, motionless but ready, until the final command when everyone and everything else is in motion. To the uninitiated (not me), or confused (me), it might well seem as if the call to ‘*Background!*’ is intended as it was originally, and so they begin their action at that penultimate cue. But again, that’s not what really happens; for some reason, they are habituated to wait until ‘*Action*’, and since no one ever corrects it, or even

addresses it, the mistake is repeated, and the consistent vagary passed on.

Who cares? Right? So what? Except here I am, the Woodman himself gave me direction. The scene is going to open on a medium shot of me, then widen out to a larger frame to include approaching the three dark chocolate lovelies. Except now, under great pressure to live up to the promise of this surreal moment and perform as required by my iconic hero, I'm stymied by the fact that every time they call "*Background!*" I don't move, habituated along with everyone else. So instead, I follow the tradition of not moving until "*Action!*" This is not what the Woodman wants; he's not confused, he's not habituated; he wants it as it's supposed to be. So, I blew the cue. The AD yells out "*Background!*" and they begin rolling the camera again. After a beat or two when I don't move, and it's clear I'm not going to, the first AD yells, "*Cut! Everybody take your first positions. Back to one!*" Everyone knows what that means. This happens once more because, in keeping with the communal, hereditary neurosis, no one explicitly corrects me. The vagueness is almost protocol. Instead, one of the second ADs comes over to me. I'm expecting to be replaced, taken out of my position, publicly humiliated—all eyes momentarily focused on a background actor given a coveted 'featured' spot, blowing a simple cue. But when he gets close enough, he quietly tells me, "*I'll tap your shoulder, that's the cue. Got it?*" It shouldn't have come to this, but it did. And it's happened before, similar

scenarios, like on set as one of “*Trupo’s dirty detectives*” in *American Gangster* (2007)—although that time was ‘B unit,’ which I’ll get to later—or another high-profile time, ‘A unit,’ and big-time on the set of Spike Lee’s “*Inside Man*” (2006). Right in the glaring presence of everybody, the focal point of everyone’s attention for what should only have been two or three seconds tops, it felt like the whole world was zeroed in on me. This included the entire production company, surrounded by a curious assortment of silently mesmerized, real-life Wall Street onlookers and the squad of local cops assigned to the NYPD Film and Television Unit, probably around one hundred people, or more, including the leading lady and star herself, Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Jody Foster, watching me miscue when time like that is money—big money. Again and again, until an AD, my pal “*Boogie*,” who positioned me there in the first place (another coveted featured spot), breaks ranks to approach me from across the street where the camera and director teams are stationed and focused, only to resort to the always reliable individualized cue, directing the nearest PA who gives me the expected visual cue, a hand signal. When finally set up right, everything works as intended, like a ticking clock, perfectly, so the day was saved, and the scene remains. I’m the beat-cop putting on his cap before exiting the scene at the top of the shot, just as Ms. Foster appears in frame. More about those memorable shoots later, but for now, consider it another instance of surrealism. Getting back to *Celebrity*, of course,

now the timing was correct, and the scene, complete with complex camera choreography and blocking supporting the dialogue of the principal leads—though left on the editing room floor—was successfully shot. With a little bit of anxiety and a lot of help from industry colleagues and friends, I came through for the Woodman, lively, and have this neat little tale to tell, me, the retired trucker turned budding movie star, directed by a personal hero and industry legend.

In fact, this was not my first encounter with the Woodman. Only a few years before, back in my Arkay Trucking days, while riding crosstown in the passenger seat of my truck one afternoon, I spotted him and Mia, both in dark sunglasses, she with a scarf covering her hair, heading uptown by foot on Park Avenue. “*Stop. Pull over,*” I told my wheelman, then jumped out carrying my leather-bound daily planner, ran up ahead slightly past them, then turned around to face them as they strolled up the fancy boulevard, until then unaware of my presence. Now, I know he had a reputation for hating when people did this, especially if it's by surprise — really annoying. I didn't want to impose, but a chance like this was not to be squandered over niceties; it was Woody Allen of “*Play It Again, Sam,*” “*Take the Money and Run,*” “*Broadway Danny Rose,*” “*Annie Hall,*” “*Crimes and Misdemeanors*” and “*Bananas*” fame. I was going to ask for his autograph. The instant we made eye contact, already holding the pen with the day planner open, I could see his annoyance and sensed he

was about to react. So, I pushed the booklet forward, inches from his grasp, and with a quiet tone of urgency, simply said, “*Please.*” At that point, having braced for him to say something harsh that would have hurt but seizing the chance anyway, I defused the ticking bomb. He probably saw that too—my anxious determination—so he took the book, scribbled his signature, and returned it. Having captured my prize and without another word spoken, I sprinted back away as quickly as I approached him, continuing on our separate ways. I never expected the twain to meet again, until just before the twain did. Today, no longer a star-struck, gypsy trucker fan on the loose, I was a professional film actor, replacing that leather-bound day planner with a headshot and actor’s résumé, directed by the man himself. As is worth repeating one more time, a five-dollar word: *surreal*.

Twelve years of a creative, productive and rewarding trucking life may have begun with a bang but ended with an ignominious whimper.

For details on the big bang, see Volume II. For now, let's pick up from the post-whimper resurrection period and call it the birth of *bigrobtheactor*. It's the dead of winter, probably mid-January, in either 1992 or 93. I'm driving the graveyard shift from 6PM to 6AM for one of the last local car-service

operations I hadn't yet been fired or blackballed from. They heap so much abuse on you—the owners, managers, even many customers, and certainly many of the other local citizen drivers—that no one respects cabbies very much. You're bound to either blow your stack at some point or hold it in and develop tumors. For me, however, there's always a 'last straw' event, usually an insult atop an injury or in whatever form it takes. That point typically signifies the end of the employment line, from which there's no return. It's as if the time had finally come to, as the song suggests, proclaim, "*Take this job and shove it*", all delivered with a barrage of insults, vulgar invective and threats.

Although circumstances were reliably headed in that inevitable direction, we weren't quite there yet at Dawson's Car Service in Baldwin, New York. I was taking home cash every night, building up a war chest to finance my next big move, however indistinct it was as yet. This was not a forever job or life-style choice; it was a weigh station like purgatory. As I sat one frigid, dark night, engine running, heater blowing, two-way radio crackling, jazz radio on the tuner, WBGO out of Newark, idling under the concrete and steel LIRR train trestle at the station waiting for the next call, contemplating my present (*where exactly am I?*), in the wake of near complete self-destruction, recovering once again from a bout of codeine-saturated madness, this time in my thirties, how I got there and where I was headed, it began to slowly dawn on

me that since I already decided not to resurrect Arkay Trucking, Icarus in ashes; fully sated; that I had achieved all from it I started out to, and despite the regrettable rout, contentedly called the entire enterprise a wrap; that despite my gloomy present, the car-service income supplementing the modest, Social Security Disability bailouts (thank you, Uncle Sam), paying my weekly rooming house rent in cash, cooking canned food out of a hotplate washed in the bathroom sink, making my monthly interest payments to the credit card account I lived off for nearly a year before getting myself on the federal dole (thank you, American Express) and putting things somewhat better together, including my second-rate gigolo career, slowly, painfully but surely climbing out from under the rock pile I buried myself under once again, bleeding and broken, literally, I saw that I had the chance. In fact, there might be a ‘silver lining’ to this fiasco, to recreate myself any way I chose and was capable of. That’s the creation myth of *bigrobtheactor*; a star was born.

Back in my late teens, after a number of celebrated stints in the local jailhouse or the year spent at the in-patient court-mandated rehab facility, sometime around then, after my cross-country escapade and my initial naval stint, I decided to become an independent trucker. At first on another man's crew, and then, eventually, graduate to a crew and company of my own. It wasn't an elite rocket science profession, but it wasn't as degrading as ‘*car service driver*’ either, and it was

fun. The idea was, first off, to be outdoors, not confined to any indoors space, free from physical confines, almost constant movement, free to choose my own gigs, make my own hours, hire whomever I pleased, decide my own routes and rates, as independent and autonomous as I can make it. On top of that was a finer, more creative and specific goal: I was going to be a trucker's trucker and expert delivery man handling tough-to-make-happen jobs, tight fits, tight schedules, reliably, orderly, confidently, and competitively. I was going to be a trucker as elite in my profession as the salesmen and craftsmen I'd hire out to were to theirs; top-shelf vendors, world-class upholsterers, cabinet makers, architects, designers, and to wealthy, talented, and successful homeowners from a wide variety of industries and walks of life, from Saudi royalty in Greenwich, Connecticut, to *cosa nostra* types in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, to plastic surgeons in Southampton, Long Island.

Let me give you an example. Now, before I begin, please understand that it took years of dedication to those trucking ideals before getting to the place I'm about to describe, and it was a mostly methodical, step-by-step process, fueled by the principal belief that the next job's arrival was predicated by the last job's successful completion. That was my marketing strategy, and, oddly enough, simple as it was, it worked.

The call came in from my client, top-tier interior designer Tom O'Toole, a sort of Great Gatsby meets David Bowie type, quiet and reserved, friendly enough but always serious. Anyway, his outfit's clients were wealthy people, and that's the team I wanted to play on. The 'outfit' was staffed by two very cool, middle-aged gay guys, real gentlemen, Charles and Michael, elegant without being snooty, always situating themselves somehow on the cusp of real wealth, usually but not exclusively old money wealth, and gathering me in along with them and their carefully selected vendors and artisans. I believe they were a couple since they were dandies and shared the same living space, an apartment above a storefront up on Madison in the 70s, but I'm not sure. I do know for sure they were talented, reliable, and glad to have me alongside them on the bench. As a natural effect of trucking, I'd be introduced through them to both their clients and vendors, to whom I would explain that I was an independent trucker and therefore available to them should the need arise. My reference was clear; in this case, Tom sent me. Good enough. Maybe not so often with homeowners, but for cabinet makers, antique dealers, and upholsterers, the need is constant. So, doing a good job, no damage, on time and on budget, all the time, plus being a charming son-of-a-bitch, all but guaranteed more work and growth, a network constructed node by node. Naturally, most of them already had reliable or semi-reliable truckers, and they let me know right away, but I was prepared for that response and told them, "*Of course. Take my card just*

in case. Consider my services a backup resource.” And it went from there. Eventually, though not always, the phone would ring, and I would have a foot in the door.

Tom told me of a huge sofa that was to be delivered to a Park Avenue penthouse duplex, but the blessed thing wouldn’t fit in the elevator, too long, too wide, too awkward, too expensive, no how, no way. Maybe they failed to take that into consideration when designing the one-of-a-kind piece. I didn’t ask. Whatever, it was too late now. The options were to use a very, very expensive hoist, fully insured complete with union payoffs built in, like a crane from outside and then pull it in through a doorway or window on the terrace, or, call me. The specific request was to go over there and check out the scene, then advise them on what I might suggest. The expense of the hoist would come out of Tom’s end, so they really wanted to avoid it, the value of that service being almost equal to the item itself; it would eat up all the profits, and maybe then some. Of course, I’d be paid a minimum consulting fee, my standard rate, and then, pending my report they’d have to make a decision. For that moment, I was the man. *Wunderbar*. A ‘somebody’ at last.

As it turned out, working with the building superintendent in this expensive, exclusive condo, we saw that it would be possible to ride the piece up through one of the main passenger elevator shafts by resting it on top of the car ceiling,

holding it in place as we rode along with it ascending the ten or twenty floors. Once we arrived at the floor just below, and because the elevator opened right into the reception area of the apartment (yes, the apartment occupied the entire floor so they functionally had their own elevator), we could lift it up and through the opened elevator doors and easily place it within the apartment in its designated spot. That was the easy part. The trickier part was getting it up there clean and without any tears in the fabric or other unspecified visible damage. The elevator shaft was about as pristine as one might expect, full of thick, dark soot, decades of dust, and implacable, black grease. The fabric for this beauty was sought out from all corners of the globe, in this case, discovered in Holland where it was produced, where the clients themselves took the trip to select and approve, so getting it up there clean and undamaged was paramount. Given enough proper preparation, creating a shrink-wrapped plastic cocoon for it, and patience, and experience matched with just enough upper body strength, made it doable. The fee I'd require for the day's pay would be just that, a day's pay for me and at least one helper, excluding the building staff whose assistance was necessary. Any remuneration for them would have to come from others. Anyway, a day's pay like that, even a generous one, amounting to an entire month of my bills, would still be a fraction of the cost of the hoist operation, so my proposal was quickly accepted. They had the confidence in me to believe I could size it up, make a plan and pull it off. Now, with

everyone incentivized, another ‘A game’ exercise, along with the right help, I did. It was always and mainly about building teams. Teams and networks, then managing them to fulfill the task, and end up with a healthy deposit into my bank account for all that effort. That’s business well done, all but ensuring the next job was on the way, Arkay Trucking style. But this story is not about that. Rather, this story is about the film set and my immediate addiction to it. So, let’s go back to the cab stand for a moment, back to that night under the cold, dark trestle, listening to that jazz music, wondering to myself, what’s next? What comes after this?

Actor. Begins with the letter ‘A’.

After accountant, but before astronaut, cowboy, secret agent, soldier, and spy—yes, even before assassin—no one’s going to care how many insane felony convictions I collected over the years. It was always in me, the impulse to perform somehow. When we were kids, I’d write scripts using images for my kid sister to ‘read’ during my made-up plays performed for my parents and their friends. Or at summer camp, where I was Tevya singing to Goldie in a glued-to-my-face beard, “*Do you love me?*” Later, with my blessed grandmother, we watched Edward G. Robinson as *Little Caesar*, James Cagney as *Rocky Sullivan*, the angel with the dirty face, Paul Muni as the original *Scarface*, or escaping

the chain gang, and eventually Dustin Hoffman stumbling across forty-second street as Enrico “Ratso” Salvatore Rizzo. *“I’m walkin’ here! I’m walkin’ here! Up yours, you son-of-a-bitch, can’t talk to me that way... Don’t worry about that. Actually, that ain’t a bad way to pick up insurance, y’know.”* Thank you, Waldo Salt. All the time thinking to myself, *‘That looks like fun, a lot of fun, real fun, and I can probably do it well enough too.’ That’s almost me anyway.* That was the rage at the cab-stand bosses and anyone else who tried to step on me and run me into the ground as my father did. So, the time has come to put my foot in that door. But where was it? I’d be looking at myself in the side-view mirror and think, *‘Are you a cab driver? Are you still a moving man? Now a second-rate gigolo? Are you not on felony probation once again for yet another handgun possession charge? Are you crazy, or what? Who are you looking to shoot? Is the IRA after you? The IRS? The Mossad? The mafia? If there’s danger? Stay away. Eureka! Look at you. Look at that face, listen to that voice; you’re a real and actual character, whoever it might be—it’s authentic. So, why not gather your remaining wits and give it a try? What’s there to lose?’* Once that was settled, not long after, in a slow but inexorable decision-making process, the main question then became, okay, *how and where to start? Where’s that door?*

Help Wanted

Where else? I was no stranger to local newspaper classifieds; they'd come in handy many a time up and down the coast, so why not again? Okay, there it was, possibly the first door: "Wanted: Actors, Models, and Talent" read the so-called talent agency's ad in the top Long Island paper, Newsday and included an address and phone number. The location was only a few towns away — in fact, the same one where my MIA father could likely be found if anyone cared to look (not me, not just yet). This meant reachable by public transportation or, if need be, by borrowed car or thumb. The thing is, just from inside that door, once my appointment was scheduled and I arrived on time at this three-room, ground-floor office in a Long Island strip mall storefront, they saw me coming right away — literally, another half-deluded sucker.

As most of us know the mark plays a significant role in the con. The mark wants to believe the con, and in all but the clumsiest of scenarios, the con is willing and able to oblige. *'Sure, you're a movie-star type. There's tons of work out there for guys like you, and we can help provide it. But first, well, you're gonna need some headshots and a model's 'contact sheet.' So, we need to schedule a shoot with one of our photographers. We have a price list breakdown of exactly what we offer, the terms on which the packages are served, and a contract for you to sign, giving us exclusive rights to the commissions on any work you get through us. You may not seek work through any other agency for the length of the term.*

If you do? We get our commission for that too. Sounds harsh? Think of it this way: you're an undiscovered star, and we're going to help you get discovered. You okay with that? Good. Sign here, and let's get started.'

Now, being that I was coming up out of a figurative grave, yet again, this time in my early thirties, much harsher than the time before in my early twenties just out of eight long months in the can, after bringing my trucking enterprise to an unceremonious and inglorious close, and otherwise destroying what was left of the life that was financed and fueled by it—my truck, my car, motorcycle, girlfriends, apartment, reputation, etc.—and now back on felony probation for yet another bout of handgun lunacy, my abdomen damaged by a hernia split from where my lower intestine had to be occasionally pushed back in manually, bleeding from the mouth when I spoke due to loosened teeth, and aside the charity of dear friends, the Koengsidorfs, of Big Ritchie fame (see Volumes I and II), one step away from homeless and alone. My loving mother had already advised me, “*Keep your distance*,” so with self-esteem scraping the bottom but credit score still quite high, the mark was ripe for the taking. With that, a marketable ‘commercial look’ and a still credit-worthy American Express card, one of the few but still useful salvaged vestiges, I signed on the dotted line and charged about fifteen hundred dollars for services in the form of pictures it turned out I never needed or used. Well, at least I

now had a new, compelling and challenging direction, but I had that before walking in, the money then spent initiated genuine commitment.

The chunky, thirty-something, five-foot-nothing frosted-blond woman, about my age, who ran the show presented an authentic enough picture: Hollywood elitist in Massapequa, Long Island, if you get my drift. They probably did help people get started with legitimate gigs, but my alarm went off soon after I signed on the dotted line when buyer's remorse kicked in. Something told me — I'm not sure exactly what or how — that I overstepped, and in the wrong direction. That alarming revelation came about by absorbing their grandiose suggestions, supported by vague promises that I couldn't reasonably count on being kept. Was it really that easy? Serious talent agencies, I belatedly figured, don't sell pictures, photo sessions, acting classes, or any of that. Those are entirely other businesses left to the pros in those specialized realms. During the shoot, now a *fait accompli* (refunds were unlikely), the photographer quietly gave me some good, solid, and relevant advice: “*What you want to do is get involved with an acting school in the city. There you will meet others taking the same trip, and that will do more for you than a thousand different headshots and ‘looks’*”. Of course, he was right. He also mentioned the Ross Reports, a previously unknown and invaluable utility, but as I said, the money was already spent. Money I didn't even actually have, borrowed money at a

heavy price, just paying the interest alone every month, money added to the debt I was already in hock to the credit card companies for, financing life without income for a year or so after stumbling back from the Tel-Aviv beach, broken, busted up but still alive. Anyway, regrettably or not, that's how it started, but fortunately enough, that's not how it ended.

Stallone in the city

Fast forward a few months. It's after camp, the early fall, now, living in the city, dorming at the 92nd StreetY while attending college full-time at a top criminal justice school. Despite numerous counts of misdirection, misunderstandings, and missed opportunities, I maintained dedication to finding and entering through that elusive door. So far, I remained unsuccessful at getting myself on a real and actual film set as a paid professional participant. Mind you, the challenge wasn't merely to get myself on any set—that was hard enough—but to land on a set as described: paid, meaning as a professional, even as a novice pro, sure, of course, fine, but a pro with a staked claim nonetheless. Volunteering as an extra on a student film would have been a lot easier, if you could even find them and be invited, but my goal was much harder to achieve, especially for someone without a guiding hand or a terrific set of knockers supporting a sweet and the almighty innocent-looking *'I like you, come fuck me'* smile.

Some of the temporary misdirection came from a well-known outfit in the city called *Actors Reps*, which somehow, even while still in the throes of Long Island taxi-driving gigilodom, through the casting of a wide exploration net, came to mind. It was a similar setup to the one in Massapequa, a talent agency, but Actors Reps was in Times Square, just off Broadway, not a far-flung strip mall in the suburbs, and they weren't selling pictures or lessons. This gave it an air of credibility that kept me coming back to them over and over. Between taxi runs, I'd make the calls from payphones, shoving quarters, nickels, and dimes into the machine while waiting on hold in the nighttime winter freeze for the legendary gatekeeper, Mr. Richard Brennan, to pick up and give me an appointment to come in and register with them. That was to be when I'd hand him my blank résumé and too expensive headshot and do a little dramatic performance for him. That hoped-for event would require a full day between traveling back and forth and the actual appointment, but that was a given; time would need to be spent, and my ass would have to move and keep moving. Okay. No problem, but let's get somewhere in the process. The misdirection took the form of repeated calls over a number of weeks before that appointment was ever made. "*Call again next week.*" "*Richard's on vacation.*" "*We're not seeing anyone new this week. Call back*", click. Again and again. Call after call, week after week. It was clear that they were always quite busy with thousands of aspiring actors competing for only dozens of gigs. There was no dearth of

applicants coming from all over the country, if not the entire glob, all trying to get that foot in that same door and at the same time. When the illustrious Mr. Richard finally did take the call and the appointment made and kept, the reading went quite well; it played to my strengths. The acting casting director, in this case Richard, selects a monologue from a pile of well-known scripts that might fit your look and character naturally without too much of a stretch and that's your audition. So, after shaking my hand, giving me a once-over, then taking my paperwork and picture, he selected Terry Molly from "On The Waterfront", the "*I coulda' been a contenda' scene*". Perfect for me. I love that bit: "*You don't understand, I could'a had class! I could'a been'a contenda'. I could have been somebody. Instead of a bum... which is what I am. Let's face it. It was you, Charley!*" At the close of the 90-second cold (unrehearsed) reading, we both laughed, shook hands again, and he told me yet again to call him next week. So, I left without a gig but not quite still at square one. I came out of that office more inspired and convinced than ever that I had something useful to offer the industry; I just demonstrated it to a pro. Sooner or later, if I didn't give up and quit in frustration or due to a failure of will, my value would be recognized, and I'd get on a set and be paid. I just had to go through the steps, however many they turned out to be.

Okay, full time school, all my classes jammed into two full days a week, giving me time for the hunt, now in my

mid-thirties, thirsty to learn and loving the vibe at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice (which I'd heard of but never imagined I'd attend until just a few months before I did, a shock to the former felon's mind), I was still searching for the elusive first acting gig that remained tantalizingly close but still yet to arrive. When it eventually did, it wasn't even through Actors Rep. With them, it was more of the same old routine: 'check in' once a week by phone for updates about any possible gigs coming up. Okay, that was on my To-Do list, not a home run but definitely a step forward because after finally registering with them, I was no longer an anonymous and detached voice, just one among thousands, it was me, Marlon Brando. Again, the idea was to get paid. The amount wasn't so important as long as it was in legally earned American currency, but the imagined prestige—that counted, an actor, a professional actor. I had already mis-spent a nice chunk of borrowed change, which had to not only be paid back, with interest, but also turned into an investment, however circuitous, that would bring a return. Otherwise, I'd have to count it as a loss, and that wasn't the plan; it was in addition to the plan.

The photographer back at the strip mall mentioned a quarterly industry publication called the Ross Reports. It was a comprehensive directory of all the current, active, legitimate participants in the industry on both coasts: talent managers, talent agents and agencies, casting directors, production

houses, studios, networks, and projects in pre-production, post-production, and in ‘principal photography’, meaning currently shooting, etc. — the who’s who of the day’s business. From that list, you could target specific players and projects to introduce yourself to by whatever means available. These weren’t people you could just call up out of the blue and schedule an appointment with. Nope. Unlike Actors Reps, which specialized in newcomers, you wouldn’t even get past whoever picked up the phone. They’d hang up as soon as they identified you as an industry nobody, a waste of their time, sometimes even in mid-sentence. “*Hello! But... but... Hello?*” They were outfits connected to networks of similarly positioned outfits, a very tight circle, and if you weren’t coming at them through one of them, well, good luck, because that’s what you’d need. Otherwise, if no one had ever heard of you, the door was slammed shut and quick. Don’t call us - we’ll call you. The joke was: “*Knock knock. Who’s there? Robert Kabakoff. Robert Kabakoff who? That’s showbiz.*” However, with all that said, the Ross Reports, once you were able to track them down to the only two places in the city that carried them, yet another hurdle, were if not very useful, still well worth the cost and the trouble at the time. At least I was able to get a ‘lay of the land’ from them, if not a key to any door.

Somehow, it’s not so clear exactly why, but I decided to get new pictures. The Long Island ones looked, well, Long Island,

exactly what they were, not bad, but not right either. The males, including me, all trying to look hard and mean or goofy, friendly and cute, or both; the females doing their best to look sexy and willing, or goofy and cute, rarely both, but always proforma. Someone, it's not clear who, suggested a certain well-known and very talented fashion photographer who specialized in models' contact sheets and headshots, not actor's headshots, but was occasionally willing and quite capable of coming up with something useful for them too, even artistic in that realm if she chose to, an older, elegant French lady working in the city by the name of Norine Perreault. That meant ponying up another cool five-hundred, her bottom-line price discounted for actors just starting out. By this time, the credit card debt had been retired and some savings began to accrue, so while dorming in a tiny, top-floor room at the 92nd Street Y, it wasn't quite as big a sacrifice as the fifteen hundred or so I put down on my Amex for the first shots. Anyway, she did a great job, and there were several fine options to choose from for my 'official' headshot; I looked like a rising young star, more Al Pacino or Richard Dreyfus with an ascot and a beard than Sly Stallone or Clint Eastwood with a punching bag or a six-gun, or at least a serious up-and-comer. There were even a few additional usable shots just in case more were needed, maybe for postcard advertising or personal collectibles, later industry use, artifacts, whatever. Armed with them, I went to work on the Ross Reports, scouring the pocket-sized publication of copious lists for one

hundred players: casting directors, talent agents, networks, even some production companies currently shooting television series and big-budget films. Of course, I understood that they get dozens every day, possibly hundreds every week, maybe more, and probably don't even open most of them; there just isn't the time or need. So they pile up in a corner of the office and are disposed of regularly, but some, perhaps mine, just might get through and move the ball, even if only a quarter inch, but in the right direction. All I needed was one good contact, the right one. That's all. After selecting what I guessed might be the most promising targets, printing up one hundred copies, buying the right-sized envelopes and postage, creating and printing up some sort of résumé to staple to the back of each, and finally, a trip to the post office marked the next step in what had been a lengthy, time-consuming and expensive process just getting even this far, i.e., nowhere, still no paid gig.

Meanwhile, while doing all this and attending John Jay full time as an undergraduate, completely absorbed by every minute of that too, the outlaw mind was busy evolving into a law enforcement mind, the opposite side of the same coin, Al Capone in character to Elliot Ness in character, art and life in harmonious, mutually flattering imitation, dividing time equally between the two pursuits. Any leftover time filled by the gym and many of the social, topical, timely, and diversionary activities the Big Apple is famous for and

exclusive to. One afternoon I'd be in a small classroom attending a presentation by a well-known New York City detective turned private eye turned movie actor, "Bo" Dietl. The next, across town, another with a reception for the evening's guest speaker at the 92nd Street Y, Mr. Elie Wiesel, who I was then able to meet for a second time, the first back in my *Arkay Trucking* days as a guest in a garden party I somehow got myself invited to, more surreality. So, it was all good, my hopes were high but my expectations were modest and relatively low. I wasn't aiming for an Oscar (or the Nobel Peace Prize), though I wouldn't shun one either. Rather, as a working man, I was simply aiming at employment, professional engagements as an actor. *Hey Ma'! Look at me! That's me on the screen!*

It's possible that as a kid back in Brooklyn, my ma' would look at me and say, "*You belong on television*" and it stuck. Maybe I just had to show her she was right and I could do it. At the same time, my radar was scanning for gigs anywhere and everywhere they might be found, asking around, searching Craigslist, and calling in with Actors Reps, until I came across the name Ulysses Terroro, a name that stuck for its fluidity and listing as a casting agent. The skinny, swarthy, thirty-something Latino dude in sunglasses and a New York attitude casts for music videos, and they shoot music videos all the time so the need for background actors and new faces is nearly constant. This was just about the same time I had all

but given up on the hope, despite my commitment to make my first gig a paid one, and was prepared to lower my standard and swallow my pride just for a chance to be on a professional set the first time. Ulysses's casting notice for 'all types' gave a phone number which I immediately called. These gigs book up fast, within hours if not minutes, that would be 'New York minutes.' He picks up the phone, asks a few questions about my look, age, and availability, then, at the conclusion of that memorable conversation, with the firm voice of confident command announced: "*The pay is \$25.*" Huh? What? Money?? Paid??? *Bingo!!!*

While I don't remember much about the gig— who the principal leads were, what band or performer, except that it was outdoors, an exterior shot involving about twenty or thirty of us running after whoever it was that the camera was focused on— it was a lot of fun; a lot of laughing along with a lot of serious, focused effort, everyone on exactly the same page. The whole idea of creating a make-believe moment and capturing it forever, preserved on film, made it all the more valuable, meaningful, and exciting. I was helping create art with my body, with my presence and performance, and knew right there, as soon as I got to set, seeing the equipment being prepared, the lights, the tracks, and camera setups, the grips setting up the screens, filters, and shades, watching the production team and actors show up and get to work doing

their things, before we even shot the first take, this was it, and I had to have more.

The next week when I called to check in with the elusive Mr. Magic, Richard Brennan said they were booking a New York State Lottery commercial shooting next week and needed more than a hundred non-union background for the shot. In my excitement at the prospect, I mentioned to him that I landed my first gig the week before with Ulysses Terrero. Once he heard that name, and repeated it, he said: “*Ulysses booked you? Okay. Your check-in number is...*” meaning that I was now booked on the lottery commercial, and gig number two was going to be paid the top non-union rate of the day, a flat \$75 cash for the shoot, or session. Bingo again. The ball I had set in motion almost two years before was finally rolling in the desired direction and with it my star rising.

“You gotta be in it to win it”

Yeah, you got that right. That was the tagline slogan selected to promote the New York State Lotto program, and it fit my circumstances in a number of ways, particularly that day on set at the BAM, the heralded Brooklyn Academy of Music — the shoot location, an 'interior'. I was now in it. With the principal lead up on the stage, in this case, the guy reading the

lucky drawn numbers, they set up the shot using the hundred or more non-union extras, complementing the required number of union member slots. Maybe another fifty or sixty bodies, whatever that particular contract required, in a section of the theater's seating. They'd shoot the crowd's '*reaction shots*' and then reposition the same people in a different configuration in another audience section to shoot the next. This process was repeated again and again until, for the camera's sake, it appeared as if the two-thousand-seat house was full.

While this, my second shoot, wasn't quite as much fun as chasing the guy down the street in the first one was — actually, after several hours of the same routine, by the lunch break, it felt kind of repetitive and boring — but at the same time, it was also quite educational. I was observing up close and learning about the process, actually the best way, as a participant.

At the end of the ten to twelve-hour day, after the still-excited non-union people lined up to be paid first, as I headed out of the theater, I was happenstantially joined by two older women, union members who had still been on the clock to the last minute (ch-ching!) while the others were 'wrapped out'. They had the nonplussed look and aura of seasoned pros, so I focused on the opportunity to gain a little more insight from them. Earlier that week, I attended an audition at Gray

Advertising, one of the biggies, for a beard coloring product commercial — actually, it was for the package itself. In fact, it was a ‘call back’, meaning I had made it to the second round, which ratcheted the tension and excitement up several notches, despite some unpleasant events during the call that I’ll reveal a bit later.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, I asked the two ladies, *“How long do you wait after the callback to judge for yourself whether or not it’s a hit or a miss?”* The answer surprised and informed me, and I held onto it from that point forward. One of them looked over to me and, with a light-hearted but earnest tone and demeanor, as the other listened and nodded, explaining, *“You forget it as soon as you leave the audition. It’s over. You had your performance; be grateful for that and let it go. Keep your eye on the future, not on the past. If it catches up to you? Great. You pick it up again. If not, you just keep thinking about the next audition, not the last one, the next gig, and so on and so forth.”* Indeed, just like ‘the great one,’ hockey star Wayne Gretzky said about keeping your eye on the puck — where it’s going, not where it’s been. Their advice proved right, words of wisdom and experience I adopted and passed on whenever called for.

As for the unpleasantness at the callback, I’ll explain. The first unexpected jolt came as soon as I signed in and entered the waiting room, now on the fortieth floor of Gray Advertising

headquarters on Third Avenue, the big time. At the initial audition a few days before, a makeshift studio set up in a dusty midtown loft for the purpose, although not quite an ‘open’ or ‘cattle call’, there were many prospects present—dozens of young, bearded, male actors invited after being submitted by agents. It was an easy, fun experience. Everyone was upbeat, casually enjoying the moment, cautiously hopeful for their prospects. When called into the casting room, you take your position on the ‘mark,’ a strip of usually blue tape on the floor, perhaps ten feet in front of the camera, and on cue, ‘slate’. This meant that after the casting director barked out the one-syllable word, whose meaning I was about to learn by guessing and a subtle nod from the cameraman who sensed my confusion, she meant: look into the rolling camera and state your name, the agency that sent you, and any other specific information the casting director might explicitly require, such as height, age range, availability, eye color, ‘(contractual) conflicts’, etc. That’s it. Then you leave. Quick and easy. Over and done. They just wanted a rough idea of who to call back.

This time, the vibe was practically solemn by comparison. Not dozens milling about, swapping tips and small talk. Now, only a handful of serious young guys, all with strong or even stronger looks than mine, perfect lead male model looks. Humbling but useful. Okay, I got it; the peak narrows as it ascends, same as most competitive endeavors: high school

ball, college, then the pros. Like that. When it was my turn to be called in, though I already knew what '*slate*' meant, I didn't understand what the bossy, mid-thirties, cardigan-and-clipboard, aloof casting director meant when she barked out, "*Teeth!*" Teeth? No greeting, not even a 'hello'. Yeah, okay, thanks honey, but *teeth* what? What does that mean? She had to repeat it once or twice more, barking louder with less patience every time, before I caught on—she meant show the camera your teeth, i.e., big smile, but "*Teeth*"? That's how you talk to people? Like dogs? *Fetch? Roll-over? Beg? Teeth?* Okay. Teeth. Got it. '*Fuck you, lady,*' I felt but held in. "*Teeth*" my ass, you pompous, self-impressed nobody. But as it sunk in, *here I am, you wanted to be here, right? and so you are*, I smiled the best phony one I had which was never, under any circumstance, very convincing. That good an actor, sadly, I'm not. How do you smile at the person insulting you, like a fed-up drill sergeant chewing you out in front of the entire company? I couldn't even do it in the navy. Only really good actors and inveterate ass-kissers can do that, well or not so well, either way, we're all actors on one stage or another, "all the world," right? I get that. But ass-kissing was never my forte, so I gave it my best shot and let it go. Shortly afterward, I realized, like the saying goes, *that's showbiz*, grow a thick skin or don't show up, and I never heard back. The old gals had it right and set me straight from that point onward. Teeth. Get it? Good. Now forget it.

Now, with two paid gigs behind me, and having sent out the hundred headshots, even my modest expectations were disappointed. Out of a hundred, I anticipated a response as high as a third to as low as a handful, maybe five or six, maybe only two or three. Hmmm... How about zero? None. Not one, and after all that work, effort, time, and investment, not a call or query. Nothing. The Sounds of Silence. Thus, I discovered, this is going to be harder than I thought. And it was. But the thought of quitting never entered my mind, instead, I was even more determined to find a way to make my contribution and leave a mark. I was qualified. There were no legal obstacles or criminal convictions to bar me, and I wasn't trying out for a long-legged professional sports team like basketball or even soccer, or a seat on the corporate board of IBM, or a Nobel prize, this, the acting thing, make-believe performing as a well-casted character, that I knew I could do. So quitting never entered my mind as an option. Instead, I embraced the notion that I'd have to settle in, dig in a little deeper, practice patience, and work a lot harder. Fine. This is it and here we are. Teeth. Let's go.

Daylight (1996), inching up the ladder.

Before getting to Stallone, let me double back to John Jay for a moment for added context. Back in the same purgatory I was crawling out of during the gigolo-cab-driver stage, the thought

occurred to me that since the trucking business was certainly behind me and an acting career was an uncertain and lengthy prospect in front of me, there needed to be another activity actively engaged in the present which would lead to a desired career goal and be rewarding along the way. In the beginning stages of that transition, I crossed paths with another young single bloke, a TV star-looking process server who hunted people down that didn't want to be found. When he found them, he'd serve the papers requiring them to show up to court, civil matters of course. We shared a two-bedroom ground floor apartment in tony East Atlantic Beach, just west of America's Healthiest City, for a while, where my second-rate gigolo career was launched with but a single, all-encompassing account I'll get to in detail maybe later, about the Five Towns chiropractor's (soon-to-be-ex) wife. There, I got a close-up look at what his gig was all about, and it looked pretty cool. In fact, it looked like fun. He'd do some research, I'm not sure how—detective work, perhaps—but he'd discover a lead on their possible whereabouts. Then, after a period of subrosa surveillance, once their location was verified, he'd get in his luxury black Jeep Wrangler and pounce. Sometimes, he'd have to devise a creative ruse to get at them; for instance, posing as a singing telegram guy in a tuxedo or a flower delivery man any single lady would gladly open the door for and receive. But along with the bouquet came the summons: *served*. As I said, it looked like fun. Combined with another out-of-the-ordinary experience

involving the protection management of a certain well-known and, to some, notorious VIP in the person of a Brooklyn-bred rogue rabbi, a (former) member of the Knesset and another iconic childhood hero of mine, I enrolled at John Jay full-time, days. There, on top of my G.E.D., I would earn a bachelor's degree in security management and make my way into the world of private investigation and professional protection management.

Back to Stallone and gig number three. The call was for hundreds of nonunion extras to work an all-night exterior shoot in the bitter cold of dead winter for pennies. Divide \$75 by 12 hours, then subtract the agency's commission, which might range from 10-30%. You might think that's a tall order to fill, but you'd be wrong. This was going to be my first foray into the big time, a studio blockbuster starring the Italian Stallion himself, and he would be there. Like everyone else, I couldn't get there fast enough. The call time was 10 PM. You're given a check-in number by the agency that booked you and told the location, time, and what colors not to wear. If you show up wearing, let's say, red or bright patterns, the camera will, of course, pick it up, and it might detract from the overall tone and vision. So, if you show up that way, either you'll be given something else by the wardrobe department, or you'll never make it to set. In the case of non-union extras? You might even be released, i.e., sent home without pay, and possibly blacklisted by the agency.

As soon as I got to the Manhattan esplanade of the Midtown Tunnel, which had been shut down to traffic, I saw an array of klieg lights outside two huge, side-by-side, well-lit, and heated tents, circus-style, set up just to the side beyond the tunnel opening. Inside were scores of folding chairs and long tables. One was for union members, stocked with a copious snack bar they called craft services or '*crafty*,' filled with an endless supply of quick energy snacks, including everything from assorted boxes of Entenmann's cakes to fresh bagels (garlic, poppy seed, onion, mixed, cinnamon raisin, plain, the works) with fresh lox, with and without peppercorns and cream cheese, with and without chives. For the diet-conscious, there were fruits, nuts, and vegetables with an assortment of dips, chips, and flavored rice cakes, and huge pots of fresh brewed caffeine, one serving while another was brewing. In the second tent for the non-union riff-raff like me, there were set-ups with stacks of boxed lunches, a sandwich, an apple, and a big cookie, and cases of bottled water.

I didn't know where to look first; my eyes staggered by the community's richness, variety, and the vibrant flow of working, purpose-driven energy. The union people, in particular, were like an old-world vaudeville variety show: the strong man, the clowns, magicians, fortune-telling gypsies, acrobats, the bearded lady, fire eaters, the morbidly fat ones, super skinny ones, the extra tall, twin tattooed ladies, mustachioed midgets and dwarfs, gorgeous blonde and

brunette chorus girls, black, white, Asian, Latinos, cops, robbers, villains, and thieves—all gathered together for the act. Everyone changing into costumes, lining up to be appraised by the wardrobe department team wearing radio headphones and carrying clipboards, checking off the numbers. There were police uniforms, firefighters with gear, EMS workers, elected officials, television news reporters, extras dressed up as everything and everyone you could imagine being trapped in or just outside a flooding tunnel, the scene we were shooting that freezing cold New York night—the shattering climax of the film when the dam breaks, and the escaping masses come pouring out in a frenzied panic for survival.

Once the never-before-seen scene was absorbed to the extent possible upon first impression, if the commitment needed solidifying, it was that this was my place—this business, not trucking, not anymore; not even really a private eye or a security manager, not an outlaw or a convict jailbird on the yard either. None of that, not yet and not again, but here, it was with them and here that I belonged and fit. This was my place. It was clear. It was vivid. This was my professional tribe—the working, purposeful oddballs, the creatives, the expressive ones, the freelancers, and inveterate performers (*“If I can’t find a stage, I’ll make one.”*). Whatever they had, they brought. That’s what I saw in that tent: moi, yours truly. And the truth of that vision, along with its impact, lasted for

decades. This was where I needed to be. All I needed to do next was get into that union—*the Screen Actors Guild*. Be recognized. Be accepted. Make it official. No small task by any means and hardly a given, but I'll get to those details later.

We weren't called to set for several hours. After all the checking in, wardrobe adjustments, hair and makeup preparations, tech setup, snacking, and chit-chat with colleagues—all the preliminaries and then some—long after folks broke out the crossword puzzles and scripts and settled in, maybe around 1 AM, the PAs came in and announced, "*Check-in numbers 1 - 75 to set.*" At that point, those extras, perhaps half of the total, union and nonunion, lined up outside the warm tent. Now, in the brisk cold and aside from the kliegs, in the dark, we were placed in our first positions for a dry run, a 'camera rehearsal'. There was a great deal of complex choreography that had to be worked out before the actual filming: Who rushed where? In what path and direction? When? What would be the cues? Where to place the firemen and cops? Where do we position the news teams? And most importantly, where and exactly when does Sly enter the frame? Where do we place the cameras and at precisely which lines? Pardon the obvious, but movies don't make themselves. Everything's coordinated and needs to work in perfect sync; otherwise, it has to be shot again, meaning money lost. Indeed, there's a lot of exacting detail work to be done before, after, and of course, during. Lots and lots of it,

with the clock always ticking. As if there wasn't enough pressure with all that, everything had to be accomplished before daybreak when commercial traffic was scheduled to resume. Shooting permits, even for major productions and as generous as New York City's, are drawn with hard and fast lines, just like the sun's inevitable rising when 'night shoots' become a thing of the past, and no one wants to pay teamster overtime—believe that. Thus, there was literally no time to waste. A reshoot, the worst-case scenario, would strain the budget and release schedule. Even with everything running right along as planned, no major snafus, the night's shoot likely cost in the high five figures, excluding the star's cut. 'Waste not, want not' is the unspoken but clearly understood credo, or, as they say in Gravesend, Brooklyn, *festina lente*.

Speaking of him, the Stallion, there was a full-sized trailer set up in the center of the esplanade, just behind the main camera station, sealed off from everything else by the velvet ropes encircling it, creating about a twenty-yard deep esplanade within an esplanade. This gave the authorized entrants some breathing space between the barrier and the main trailer door opening, above a three-step stair. My first glimpse of Sly came when a black limo pulled up to the rear of the rope line, and a bodyguard exited the rear passenger door, followed by the man himself. Together, they entered the space opened up for them by a waiting PA gatekeeper, then immediately headed inside the warm and brightly lit dressing room, makeup, and

waiting lounge area designated for this exclusive purpose—Sly’s on-site domain. The man looked exactly like he did on the screen, maybe even more impressive. You could tell by his quick, bouncing gait that he was having a blast and was just as happy to be there doing this as most of the rest of us were. (Of course, he was not obliged to stand waiting in the frozen winter night air between takes at 3 AM, as was almost everybody else, frequently including the director and D.P., so that helped him keep his happy top spinning.) After all, performing was his thing too, so by that common bond, we connected.

Yes, it was a thrill just seeing Mr. Balboa, and actually being co-workers on the same project made it even more so, union or not. But that was just a taste. The real thrill came, when much later that shoot, between takes, the masses pouring out of the tunnel as if being chased by the Red Sea closing in on Pharaoh’s army the umpteenth time, when again he was picked up by the waiting limo at the edge of the frame and driven the thirty yards to the velvet barrier. Seriously. His time spent outdoors between takes in the frigid elements could be measured in micro-milliseconds, but who cared? He was him. Without his presence no one else would even have been there, let alone paid to be there, there’d be no project or gigs for anyone. Now, the thrill came after one of the frozen takes (he’s probably the character leading the disaster crew, I never asked or really cared), but as he was returning up the stairs to

the trailer door, flanked by his bodyguard, two starstruck females in their twenties or thirties, it's not clear if they were *extras* (probably) or just bystanders, ducked under the velvet barrier and before the PA could stop them ran to him, getting kissing close just before he entered the trailer through the already opened door he held by the handle. One of them reaches up and grabs him by the forearm, the bodyguard doesn't budge, but Sly turns around and with his free arm wraps her in tight to his chest, pulling her slightly upwards towards him and gives her a solid smooch right on the kisser. Her friend lets out a sudden shriek of stunned delight while the momentarily mesmerized witnesses broke into *ooows* and *aaawes* and finally applause. It was something to see, that spontaneity, I'll bet it made that girl's life, giving her something special and unique to talk about for the rest of her days. After that quick smooch he continued on his way followed by the bodyguard shutting the door behind them, the two girls left standing there speechless. I don't know if she got in trouble for that (the PA might have), a definite *no-no* on set, a major one, obviously, but she had the guts to break through and he rewarded her, and to an extent the rest of us with the public display of his essential humanity. She was a fan. He's a man. Things happen. So, yeah, this was it, adrenaline city, I was hooked, this is my scene, these are my people, here's where I belong, like Candlewick my marionette doppelganger sang, "*hi-diddle-dee-dee, an actor's life for me.*"

CHAPTER II: “*Never again.*”

Why John Jay? One of the nation's top, if not the top, criminal justice schools. Just over a decade before (see Volume II), my lunatic self imagined being some sort of dangerous outlaw, Al Capone's protégé, standing by and ready to make his bones; all I needed was the right excuse: “*Come at me, bro', I got one for you right between the eyes.*” Let's just say I was *nuts*, crazy, saturated with paranoid delusion and homicidal ideation, then manifesting exactly what I feared through my own very deliberate choices and actions, truly out-of-control, so, how was it that now, after that bout of existential madness *redux* that set in just a few short years before, after roughly that ten year period of remission, a hiatus from the clutches of the nihilistic death beast, a time empowered by sanity, sobriety and Arkay Trucking, brought about by sublime realizations set in during the months spent in the can at twenty-three for the first gun charge, discharging it at close range, now, and after serving yet another six week skid-bid in a New Jersey lockup for yet another, you guessed it, gun charge (no longer a gangster but a heroic though unlicensed bodyguard), decided to get involved with law enforcement, if not a cop, then at least a private security manager, an investigator, a private eye.

By this time in life, my early thirties, I had accumulated no fewer than three felony convictions, along with a plethora of misdemeanors and violations spanning three states and two countries. Why stop and hang a u-turn now? I had been on my way to the prison yard, or, as dad put it, “death row,” full speed ahead, no way around it since Ocean Parkway. I was goner living on borrowed time. But that's not what happened, praise Zeus. Let me go back to what I think may have been the inspiration.

As a kid growing up in the ‘60s, America was in turmoil, primarily fueled by the draft and the civil rights movement. We witnessed three assassinations and riots, cities literally burning, followed by a flood of body bags returning from the jungles of Vietnam, and images of burning napalm dropped from the sky on people living in thatched huts. It was ugly just to see in the newspapers and on TV screens, but the draft made it visceral and personally threatening. Many of us were going to die in that jungle in a war not many believed was just, moral, or even strategically sound. It's not surprising that it motivated people, especially the young, to go out into the streets in desperate protests — not only against the war itself (they even tried levitating the Pentagon, *seriously!*) but also against practically everything else, from the draft to racial discrimination, to the so-called bra-burning women's lib movement and protecting ‘the planet’. You name it; most everyone had a beef, and there were specific causes and

movements to express them. And of course, the trend included various ethnic groups, among them the Puerto Ricans' Young Lords, the African Americans' Black Panthers, white leftists the SDS and Weatherman, and us heathen Hebrews, the JDL, short for *Jewish Defense League*.

The JDL was founded by a Brooklyn-born rabbi, and in my view, a great man, *sui generis* for his time, known by his adopted name Meir Kahane. The outfit was initially formed in reaction to slow or insufficient police response to physical attacks on mostly poor, many elderly, and working-class urban Jews targeted by other members of the same general socio-economic class, usually African Americans. Jews, easily identifiable as soft targets, low-hanging fruit for third-rate predators, were assaulted on their way to the synagogue, on their way home from grocery shopping, robbed, beaten, and abused in any number of ways. At a time of high crime, urban decay, financial crisis and general unrest in the city, the cops had their hands full, finite resources, so this is not an indictment of law enforcement; it's merely a case of observing and stating the facts as I know them.

As a kid, maybe ten or eleven years old, my father took me to a couple of meetings. I wore a thick brass Star of David on a chain around my neck and a US army shirt with their logo, the fist inside the star above their motto "Never again," carefully hand-drawn with a black magic marker on the back. The

motto referred to one specific ideal or principle: *never again would the Jewish people be defenseless against their enemies*, period, and the JDL sought to put teeth into the phrase. It was a lot more than sound and fury signifying nothing; it could and did actually bite, as the Rabbi phrased it: “*Every Jew a .22*”, and there was blood.

Because he spoke of ‘*hadar*’, Jewish pride, and pointed out that established, unelected Jewish leadership had no shame because they had no honor or ‘*hadar*,’ he attracted those who, like me already did, or if not, craved it. The core members were prepared to take risks and if necessary, pay the costs of imposing a price on those who would threaten or harm us. But that was about the extent of my participation. An eleven-year-old, no matter how willing, has limited utility except for showing up at meetings and maybe wearing that shirt, whatever they accomplished, which at least gave me a feeling of participation by showing up and standing up for the home team.

One day not long after my father stopped taking me, something spooked him; a front-page article in the New York Times reported that several members of a Long Island chapter were arrested for making pipe bombs and planning to use them. These were the guys I met at the meetings and admired, one they called Samson and another Mark Binsky, so my dad, in that respect, was prescient. There was no point in his son,

not even bar-mitzvah getting mixed up with that, at least not under his watch.

But the rabbi, Meir Kahane, left a deeper, more positive impression than did any of the particular members or events. He, like me, played against type, outspoken and ready to rumble. The rabbi didn't just learn and teach Torah, or lead prayer services, or coach Arlo Guthrie through his bar-mitzvah haftorah; he partnered up with practically anyone he could recruit as an ally, from the FBI to Joe Colombo of the *cosa nostra*, and led teams of defiant young Jews in what he called a "*chaya* (animal) squad." They organized and armed with radios and conventional street weapons, clubs, and bats, mixed it up with street thugs, set up patrols, and escorted the elderly targeted members of our community where the police just didn't have the manpower for that type of exhaustive coverage.

Fearlessly, he filled a glaring gap and gaping breach in the essential foundations of the social compact. And he paid the prices for it. That's what made him unique as an American Jewish leader, that willingness to pay a price to exact a cost. For example, in 1971 he was convicted and served time for planning to bomb the Soviet mission in New York, and while in prison campaigned for and won the right to be served kosher food. That's commitment.

Jews, as individuals and leaders, are very often willing to fight, even to the death, for a wide range of causes. We have our Emma Goldmans, our Sam Gompers, our Leon Trotskys, Hanna Szenes, and even our Mickey Cohens, Abbie Hoffmans, Roy Cohns, and Hayim Solomons, but Jews fighting for Jews? Outside the Warsaw ghetto fighters, and the early Zionist chalutzim and pre-state fighters like the great Joseph Trumpldor and Moshe Barzini, or in ancient Israel back then and modern Israel today? They are there but very hard to count, especially since we Jews in the diaspora tend to hide them from history once they actually do surface, as they remind us of the need for sacrifice in battle, a condition we'll do almost anything to avoid. Think: Bar-Kochba, Jabotinsky, Begin, Yoni Netanyahu, Tzivia Lubetkin, Abba Kovner, Mordechai Anielewicz, and Barney Ross, a Jewish-American rarity at least since the great Asher Levy. Even as we celebrate Hanukkah, we emphasize the 'miracle' of the lamp rather than the heroism and valor of, for example Eleazar the Maccabee, who sacrificed his life attacking a Seleucid enemy chieftain mounted on a war elephant. There were plenty of Isidore Greenbaums, especially back then, but you need not take my word for it, there are witnesses, check with Josephus Flavius for one. Without that heroism there would have been no lamp to light, or miracle to celebrate.

But here was a man who defied all that deeply ingrained passivity and nonresponse; here was a man, a Jewish man, a

rabbi, putting himself on the line for the basic citizen's rights and human dignity of his fellow Jews. And, of course, he was demonized for it, mainly by American, shtetl-minded Jews. Twenty centuries in the ghetto take a toll. But not by all of us. Not by me. This is not an attempt at a brief biography for him; many have been written before, and many will be again. Let's say, by the time I caught up with him at a synagogue in Woodmere, more than twenty years later, he had not only already 'made aliya' (ascended, i.e., emigrated to Israel) as part of a natural progression but was now a member of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, as the sole member of his own party, Kach, which means 'thus'. Now positioned to take a second or third seat in the next election for the 120-member plenum, which would have given him outsized political leverage and posed a threat to the status quo. When I got the invitation, probably sent to me from one of the lists my name somehow got on, to attend his lecture, out of nothing more than simple curiosity, maybe a night's entertainment, and perhaps a bit of nostalgia. It was the mid-eighties already, long past the raucous 60s, so I showed up.

Anyway, back to moi, before that second fall, before the crash of Arkay Trucking. I'm the freelance entrepreneur living in his top floor studio in a five-star neighborhood, one of the Five Towns. Life is good, business is busy, my social and love life active, I'm traveling, I'm sane, sober, well fed and happy. Once I showed up and took a seat in the reasonably well

attended lecture hall, maybe one hundred and fifty attendees in a two hundred seat room, I kind of expected to see a clown, a buffoon pleading for attention and to be taken seriously after all these years outside the American scene. I don't know exactly why that was my expectation, but it was. Possibly because he left JDL behind him and with his departure it basically collapsed, and with the war ending, the civil rights movement largely successful, the vitality of the respective protest movements, including JDL began to fade. That meant he was adrift, a rebel without a cause, a self-serving wannabe, that's what I expected, but as it turned out, I was way off. What I heard and saw was a slightly graying man ablaze with raging passion, the same intense fire, if not more so, as in his youth—“*The bush burned but was not consumed.*” His piercing eyes, shrouded by a heavy, dark brow, projected a cold-hearted flame within a contained yet deadly sincerity. On fire. Unconsumed. Not flamboyant, not gesticulating, not even loud, his speech delivered a deeply penetrating emotional force through the ideas alone, driven by a quality of almost desperate urgency. No theatrics needed. I recognized everything he said; it all registered, hit home. Until then, never had I heard anyone express those unspoken, painful truths focused primarily on the current states of unelected Jewish-American leadership representing their class's interests rather than those of the broader community, particularly on assimilation and self-defense, Jewish dignity, and civil rights—a betrayal leading inexorably to communal demise.

Not only was I greatly surprised, but found the message profoundly enlightening, like a weight of entrenched denial was lifted, challenging, and deeply compelling—a message of urgency and solidarity, a virtually apocalyptic warning of approaching doom, while offering a critical alternative: a possible, if perhaps radical path to redemption.

Our alleged Jewish leadership was either incompetent or corrupt, definitely untrustworthy, selling us out through encouraging assimilation and turning the other cheek whenever threatened—a “*Bridget Loves Bernie*” loves Jesus phenomenon, not proud, not defiant, not worthy of self-respect, and certainly not Torah. He hadn’t skipped a beat from his explosive (pardon the pun) JDL street days and public oratories. “*If you think the Bible tells us to ‘turn the other cheek,’*” he’d say, “*you are reading the wrong Bible.*” It was clear: he evolved and refocused. No longer was he primarily interested in rescuing beaten-down Brooklyn Jews and restoring 'hadar' to his still wandering tribesmen in exile; he was now focused on all of Israel, the entire ‘*klal*’ (global community including every category and subcategory), but specifically the Jewish state—the nexus and *sine qua non* of Jewish survival.

That was the point of Kach. His agenda was as radical as the threats we faced; however, his thinking and expression were clear and pragmatic. Simply put, he recognized the hard clash

of ideas between those of a Jewish state—founded primarily on core Torah principles, the *sine qua non* of our national identity (‘*halacha*’, the path, i.e., Jewish law, our mission statement—the redemption of all mankind by carrying out the Cr-ator’s mandated mitzvot), and the 18th-century, Jeffersonian-style separation of church and state democracy of the *Enlightenment*. To that end, any non-Jew, specifically Arabs, Muslim Arabs in particular, including Druze, Christian Arabs, Bahá’ís, or Bedouin unwilling to accept living in a Jewish state, should not have the opportunity to do so by remaining in one, neither as citizens nor residents. Left unattended, not only would we face more wars, terror, and incitement by an inveterate ‘*fifth column*’, but by demographics alone, we could become a minority in our own country, where the majority could simply vote to change the name of the country, its flag, language, and national anthem. Then, presto-chango, without a shot fired, no more Israel, and the rest of us, the entire klal, would be back in the ghetto from where we emerged on May 14th, 1948. He threatened to, promised to, move the rejectionist, dangerous, unrelenting fifth column of unrighteous gentiles out—bus them to Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, or the Sinai, the moon, wherever, however, *achutza* (get out!)—as a desperate but necessary measure to ensure Jewish survival. Nothing more and nothing less. He didn’t ‘*hate*’ Arab. or Muslims, or anybody else, he loved Jews, big difference, in fact, ironically and to be precise, he respected them. Yes, to his thinking, very few self-respecting

Arabs or Muslims would ever pledge allegiance, feel any, or even behave as if they did to a non-Muslim, non-Arab state where they would be a minority. According to that view, Arabs, as a culture, see the world through a simple-minded dominance versus submission lens—if it's not one, then by default, it's the other. The word '*Islam*' itself means '*submission*' in Arabic, which pretty much sums it up. Not very Jeffersonian either to my thinking, but almost no one expects that from them, the bigotry of low expectations, they get passes to behave as they please, however intolerant, cruel or barbaric. And so, this is what it is and like it or not must be faced. In keeping with that the Arab inhabitants would rebel, push back, and do so without mercy, or compromise. That's what we are facing here. One cannot effectively deal with a problematic reality one ignores, disguises or denies, can one? We will not win their hearts and minds, so we must win and maintain territory and the means to control and defend it, whatever that takes. The essence of that territory, just as important as demographics, would be its national character—not merely a 'Jewish state' in name and language on the soil of our two ancient commonwealths, the land promised to Abraham and led to by Moses, conquered by Joshua, ruled by David the poet-warrior king, and Solomon the wise; destroyed by the Babylonians, occupied and defiled by the Seleucids, liberated by the Maccabees, ruled by the Hasmoneans, and then occupied and crushed by the Romans—but in its law, practice, and culture. Option two is

Auschwitz. In Kach's Israel there would be no pork for sale and buses would not run on the Sabbath, those sorts of policies, a Torah state, more or less. More about the equivocation later. Otherwise, even if we kept the flag and anthem, even if we kept a demographic majority, without Torah as our touchstone and guide, we'd devolve and degrade into "*a Hebrew speaking Portugal*".

Once the lecture ended, maybe an hour or so, and the exuberant crowd gathered around him to praise, thank and congratulate him, me among them, practically stunned by what I heard, I reached into my pocket where I just happened to have a fifty dollar bill (his visit was in part a fund-raiser for the second run in Knesset where by adding just another seat or two, would have made Kach the decisive fulcrum, able to leverage the evenly split Knesset, Labor and Likud, despite the numerical inferiority to that of king-maker status), grabbed it, took it out and pushed it into his. I didn't even need to say anything; it was nearly impossible to get his attention in the thick, highly energized crowd anyway, with everyone very likely feeling something similar to what I felt. What was necessary had already been done. With that, I left the synagogue where the encounter opened a new, totally unexpected and riveting dimension in my life. That dimension eventually led me to John Jay.

CHAPTER III: *Three SAG Waivers*

One cannot buy one's self into the Screen Actors Guild. Membership is not only not for sale, but there is no sure-fire way to achieve it. You might be lucky and get in right away, or you might never get in. There is no official affirmative action for actors. It's not even necessarily a meritocracy. Those combined factors made it all the more compelling for me, the worthiness of the challenge. I had to get in. Ever since that *Lotto* gig, when I found out that the union players made about triple or better than the non-union players earned it was clear to me, then of course reinforced by the *Daylight* gig, but it wasn't only, or even primarily about money. It was more about respect, accomplishment and being accepted as part of something I thought was inarguably and immeasurably worth my time and effort. It would mean I was seen as a colleague by the primary society of professional screen (camera) actors. When a casting director or talent manager asked the question: "*Are you union?*" I was ashamed but compelled to answer, "*No. Not yet.*" I'm a lowly wannabe. They didn't seem to care one way or another. To them, it was merely a matter of where to file your headshot – which cabinet drawer – and which projects they could submit you for.

There were a hell of a lot more non-union gigs every day than union. Union gigs are very expensive to produce; all the ‘movie stars’ are members which means all the projects they work have to be signatories to union contracts. Expensive not only because of the increase in the actors' rates, but also because of all the perks attached: workers compensation, pension and health contributions made by the producers, all types of insurances including unemployment insurance, the works. It also means all the supporting crew, the techies and art departments, all with their own unions, they get signed on too, same perks, kinda’ like a one-for-all, all-for-one thing. So, non-union jobs are plentiful all the time, and much easier to fill. That's all it meant to them, but to me, at that point, it meant all the difference in the world, the difference between success or failure at my new-found goals. The other goal was earning a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and doing something about those pesky criminal convictions, so, my plate was full. When I wasn't in a classroom or doing homework, I was beating the bushes for acting gigs, and within those gigs – the union ones that non-union players could be added on to as ‘extras’ – I was hunting for those highly prized, deeply elusive SAG ‘waivers’. Let me explain.

Each type of production—commercials, television programs, feature films, shorts, etc.—has its own SAG contracts with the producers. The contract, among all the other details, states the required number of union jobs they must include and pay the

full union rate or scale for during each shoot day, or session. For example, let's take the original *Law & Order* franchise, a project I got on frequently, almost regularly, several times a year, and always had a blast—adrenaline rush city, from the moment I was given my check-in number to the moment I was wrapped and signed-out. It's a network television series and a huge primetime hit, which means it gets renewed season after season, i.e., a lot of jobs for a lot of talented, hard working people.

Every production day may require, aside from the principals (the actors with lines and screen credits, always union), that the first, let's say, fifty background actors be union members and paid the contracted television background rate. Any number beyond fifty can be nonunion and paid accordingly, meaning whatever the producers offer, usually minimum wage. No one at that level really cared about the money, the dollar amount. People would travel from out of state the day before and stay in hotels just for the chance to get on that set, so the wage was all but meaningless to them. But the first fifty are irreducible.

A feature film may require seventy-five, or a hundred, whatever, depending on various contingencies, but it is a hard number. Each time the contracts expire, the terms are renegotiated, but whatever the new numbers turn out to be, they are fixed and respected, backed up by labor law. If you

are shooting a courtroom scene, not only do you need the main ‘day-players’ (a supporting cast of principals hired for the specific episode) and leads (series regulars), but the courtroom needs to be filled with spectators, reporters, court officers, a jury, a full gallery, the works. These roles will be filled by union background players up until the quota is filled, and the rest, often the numerical majority on any given set, nonunion.

Now, let’s say only forty-nine of the union background players show up that day, a rarity, someone’s a no-show, maybe they booked a better gig, maybe their cat got hit by a car, and they are at Kitty’s funeral, whatever, the quota still has to be filled. In that case, a non-union actor is ‘bumped up’—selected, usually by an assistant director, and given a SAG-waiver, meaning a non-union player is given a SAG contract for the day and all payments, salary, insurances, contributions, etc., are made in his or her name. That needs to happen to a non-union actor three times in order for them to qualify for admission into the guild. There is no time limit for that to happen, and waivers don’t expire, but even getting a single one is no mean trick, and it might not ever happen, so three times? Well, that’s a tall order. But it is done. Those who commit to that project usually, if they hang in long enough, and are able to get themselves hired as ‘non-union b/g’ frequently enough, eventually find a way in, usually by sheer and relentless focus and determination, like I did.

Of course, there are other ways, even less likely paths, for instance, being cast in a principal role without being a union member, then being compelled to join as in the Taft-Hartley provisions, but that's even rarer than the hen's teeth extras' waivers. Theoretically, and according to union bylaws, a producer has to explain why the performer they want is so unique and specially qualified that there are no union members capable of filling the role, so casting them is the only reasonable choice a production can make. At least that's what it says on paper, but who really knows? If they want Shirley Temple but Shirley Temple is not a union member? They will cast her anyway and make her a union member. But how many Shirley Temples are there actually? Right. Very, very few. So in that sense, it makes sense.

Law & Order

Aside from the possibility of admission to the union and making a few bucks for a day's pay, working on film and television sets provided me with a rush like I never experienced before, and I had my share, and then some. Just by being part of the top-tier talent pool was itself an honor and thrill. Participation in the creation of art, in however limited a capacity, was as real, as stimulating, as unforgettable, and crazy as it may sound, once they called *action* and began rolling film, it felt somehow like I was achieving some type of

immortality, as if being preserved in an image would last much longer after shuffling off this mortal coil than anything else in my experience could.

Here, like trucking before, and school now, I could do my best, put out all the effort required to deliver whatever I had to the project, beginning before I even got to set. How? It begins with hunting down the jobs. They don't look through the phone book trying to come up with available people who might be interested in and available to fill in these spots; they don't come to cab stands or college classrooms looking for you. You won't find them in *Newsday Help Wanted* ads either. You have to look for and find them. And you have to know where to look.

Mostly, it's through the talent agencies and casting people who are contracted by the production companies to fill these roles with specific 'types' of acceptable performers. The first one I found was the bust, the outfit in Long Island I spent all that American Express money on useless pictures at, but Actors Reps and Ulysses Terrero along with the others I connected to through the other actors on the same trip proved more worth my time. Among them the great Stanley Kaplan, a gray-haired behemoth of a man who, along with his lovely, always gently smiling Filipino wife Jasmine, ran his frantically busy agency out of his Greenwich Village high-rise. You'd call him twice a day as per instructed; he'd pick up the phone, and in place of '*hello,*' he'd say "*nothing,*"

then hang up, meaning keep calling until he had something; the revered Sylvia Fay who ran her even busier practice out of her Park Avenue South digs, and a host of others I just might get to. Of course, discovering and registering with them is only where the hunt begins. Next, there has to be a gig you can fit, and you have to be on the list of the actors they call, and then after doing the job, you have to pay most of them (not Sylvia Fay) a commission for the privilege of earning sometimes even less than the minimum wage just to be on a film set. It's a tough hustle, but the payoff can be well worth the effort, sometimes even huge, like the one I'm about to describe.

Maybe *Joseph Wiseman* is not a common household name, but I sure knew who he was and recognized him immediately. If he had not won an Oscar for his role in *Viva Zapata!* (1952) alongside Marlon Brando and Anthony Quinn, he was almost certainly nominated. Even if not, the role was memorable, as was his iconic, first-up, eponymous Bond villain, *Dr. No* (1962). Now, here he was, on the same set as me, as a lead character in the episode. Not only that, but it's the climactic conclusion of the episode where he takes the stand and brings down the house with his surprise testimony. And there I am, as a court reporter, taking notes, performing reaction shots, placed right next to or just behind but visible to the camera, one of the other leads which meant that with any luck, I'd make the final cut and be on TV! And not just on TV, but in a

hit, prime-time series together with the award-winning cast. It seemed I'd found a place. Just being paid to be there for my input was the rush, but if I kept at it long enough, drilled in deep enough, and stayed focused sharply enough, I'd somehow find my way into the union. I'd capture those three waivers or be bumped up into a speaking role on set. It had to happen. I just knew it. How? Because I committed to it, just as I had my gypsy-trucker dream more than a decade before.

For some reason, not exactly clear why, after my first few paid gigs, which took some pressure off, I took on some unpaid work in professional, network productions. Overall, the method was the madness: *Work! Work! Work!* From scripted public access television (great practice and confidence booster, just as important) to a network afternoon television show set in a studio-constructed cafe where the 'guests' watched corny old black and white movies and interacted with the host and hostess.

At that point, paid or unpaid, I had to have more. Not that I'd given up on the paid gigs, not in the least, but I knew I needed the experience and exposure, which by themselves were worth more than any payday I could reasonably expect, so I expanded my range. It was all good. All net, but even then, with that, there was a limit.

The cafe job included about a dozen ‘guests’ to fill out the ‘cafe’, and we shot almost every day of the week. The guests were rotated so as not to appear more than once or twice a week, and occasionally, they would deliberately add a segment specifically for light-hearted interaction. For example, during a commercial break, they asked us to write a short anecdote about a strange or funny pet we had. Actually having a pet or not (I didn’t) wasn’t the point; the story and its delivery were. I wrote a quick note about my 200 lb English Bulldog named *Cupcake*, who did a passable imitation of Joe Pesci in *Goodfellas*.

Once they collected and reviewed the notes, they selected me to tell my story to the hostess, a stunning blond, live on TV. When I say adrenaline, I mean adrenaline, buckets of it rushing through my system in repeating waves, head to toe. Once the camera was rolling again, live, she approached me with the mic and asked me to tell everyone about Cupcake. As soon as she got to me, she started brushing away lint, dust (dandruff?), off my thrift-shop Ralph Lauren tweed lapel, my favorite blazer, grooming me, and then asked me to give my report. I knew that even if the punchline fails (the pooch demanding to know “*what’s so funny about me?*”) that the way to handle that was with a self-deprecating shrug. But it was a shot, and I took it. Sure enough, the thirty-second monologue failed, no one laughed, but the beautiful hostess picked it up by brushing my shoulder again and saying: “*I’m*

sure all the agencies will be calling in right away to sign you up!" So, there was a joke, but it was on me, not Cupcake or the hostess. You know what? Fine. It was fun, and I got a sort of grip on the flood of adrenaline, without which, one has very limited control over their actions, a vital component to performing at one's peak. You've got to be able to roll with it, channel it into the direction you want it to go, especially at crunch time when they give that five-alarm call: "*Action!*"

After a few weeks of showing up on time every time and giving it my all, the head PA, Chris, a midwestern, Kellogg's Corn Flake-in-the-big-city type, announced that beginning next week, several, but not all, of the regulars would begin being paid. That was fantastic, music to my ears. Even if it was only twenty-five dollars per show, it would be a paid TV gig. A regular one too, so, I itched for it.

Once the next week rolled around, and my name was not announced as one of the paid players, I made that my last appearance. It was time to move on, and that's what I did. Not long afterwards, maybe a few months, the *Law and Order* episode was scheduled to screen on *the big bright green pleasure machine* (thank you, Paul Simon). Once the word came in, I broadcasted it all over John Jay; every classmate, friend, and professor was told: "*I'm gonna be on TV tonight! On Law and Order! I'm a courtroom reporter in the penultimate scene! Right there with Joseph Wiseman, Sam*

Waterston, and the heart-stopping, breathtaking Carey Lowell!” Of course, I didn’t know if I had made the final cut or not, but the prospect that I might have was overwhelming and I couldn’t keep my mouth shut.

Coincidentally enough, scheduled for the same night was another show with an earlier time slot, just before *Law and Order*. It was a one-season wonder called *Swift Justice* and a strip bar scene, my favorite, where the steady cam panned across all the guests watching the show, of which I was again, a well-dressed patron. I probably broadcast that one as well, taking the risk that if my scene was left on the editing room floor, I’d not only be disappointed but I’d lose credibility when making future announcements.

Well, wouldn’t you know it? As Dionysis and his muses would have it, not only did I make both, but for a half second or more, the scenes just about opened on me, giving me a quick featured moment that everyone saw! And in my view, I looked pretty cool on the tube. Cool, suave, and handsome, not a hint of the waves of adrenaline racing up and down my spine at the call of ‘*action!*’ I got used to hiding it, adrenaline, fight or flight, especially fear, during my *Kabbo* days when I faced off in fistfights whose outcome was uncertain at best or dreadful at worst. So, just when I needed encouragement after the cafe flop, I got it. And to top it off, back to the *Law and Order* gig, while walking back from the courtroom scene, I

felt the close presence of someone right behind me, close enough for me to turn around to see who it was so close to my tail. It was Ms. Lowell. When I looked up (she's about 5' 9") and made eye contact, for the next half second or so, she smiled at me, and my heart all but stopped. I got that too. She liked me. I was hooked again, this time, even deeper and now from yet another direction. I might even hook up with a TV star! *Hi-diddle-dee-dee!*

Though it is essential, confidence alone wasn't going to get me into the union. Confidence is what you have to bring to the table just to get in the game. After that? Skill, timing, and luck on top of a lot of precisely focused hard work, and I was up for all of it. Full blast. Despite all that, as already stated, there was no sure way. It doesn't exist; there are only possibilities, no certainties, so you have to commit to an open-ended project that involves working at it until it is achieved, knowing all the while it may never be. How badly do you want it?

It took over a year of hunting down these types of gigs, paying the commission, showing up at all hours in all weathers, night or day, indoors or out—I was there for whatever they needed, whether it be a courtroom reporter, a jailbird, a policeman, or a guest at an art gallery—hunting those waivers for me to finally get my first. It was a bit discouraging at times, all that failure, shoot after shoot, but finally, it came: waiver number one, arguably the hardest.



A courtroom reporter makes the scene on *Law and Order* (1996)

“*Great Expectations*” (1998), a remake of the nineteen forty-six Dickens classic starring Ethan Hawk, Gwyneth Paltrow, and the man himself, Robert DeNiro as the convict and secret benefactor *Abel Magwitch*. They were shooting a three-night scene in an actual Soho art gallery, the opening of a new artist's show in the script, and it needed to be populated by art-gallery opening types, as opposed to football fans. They needed artsy, avant-garde perhaps, cool and breezy types if not showy. This brings me back to Sylvia Fay Casting, the grand dame of background actors in New York. She had the contacts and contracts locked for many of the top films and television programs, and like the other background casting agencies, they helped a lot of people, including moi, break into the industry by performing as ‘extras’. It was through her office I got on board.

To get hired, or ‘cast’ for this gig, you had to commit to all three nights. Failure to show up for any of them meant you’d probably never get another chance, at least not with that casting agency, so the commitment was to be taken very seriously. For me, there was no doubt; there was nothing else I’d rather be doing, playing make-believe with movie stars and getting paid for it, even at a nonunion rate (a cool \$225 for the three nights would come in handy, no doubt).

They were set to be all-night shoots. This meant the actual art gallery could remain open for business during the day, and the number of usual nighttime neighborhood distractions could be kept to a minimum. There’s even a police detail assigned to the set to make sure nothing and no one interferes; it comes with the permit. Anyway, I grabbed the chance for a three-night gig with both hands.

As for school? I was only going two days a week, having jammed all my courses into the two days—a full deck of a semester’s full-time credits. This meant I might be tired on the last day, but I’d make it anyway, so there was no significant loss there. Burning the candle at both ends is what you do in New York City when in hot pursuit of professional aspirations. You grab the chances as they come your way and run with them for as far and as long as you can take them.

The first night, everybody’s there, the principal cast, the crew, and the extras. We show up at the call time, check in with the PAs by number, and set down our gear in a space on location,

perhaps the gallery's basement set aside for the 'extra's or 'background holding.' The wardrobe department is busy outfitting everybody—perhaps as many as a hundred guests. It's not a mob scene like the tunnel rush, but a full house. It's a party at a hip location, well attended by Andy Warhol and Edie Sedgwick types.

This particular collection of background players, including me, gave the wardrobe department the right raw material to work with. We all looked the part quite naturally; only the clothing had to be matched to the art director's specifications, the colors, styles, season, and pattern-wise. In addition to these types, since it was a chi-chi Soho gathering, there had to be about a dozen or more beautiful female model types in attendance who were cast as some sort of specialized category and paid a lot more in addition to the perk of being granted a waiver for each night. A sweet deal, especially for the models.

It wasn't really any of my business what deal they made or not, but word leaked out to the rest of us of the blatant incongruity. Specifically, they set us up as couples; for instance, me with Magda, a big bosomy Eastern European blonde with a delightful self-deprecating sense of humor. We had a lot of laughs and a lot of fun together, playing cool people at a cool event, but at the end of it, she would be a SAG member, and I would still be a waiver-less wannabe, and that would be for the exact same time and work. That sucks, but that too is showbiz.

By night two, there were already some MIAs. Someone gets another call, maybe a better gig, someone else gets a cold, others just drop out, so the crowd thins a bit. And by the third night, it thins out even more. That's showbiz too. And that's where possible opportunities lie. Now, instead of the contractually mandatory, let's say seventy-five union extras hired for the session, there may be only seventy-four or seventy-three. Maybe even fewer. But as outlined, production still has to fill those union spots, meaning some lucky nonunion extra's gonna get a '*bump*', an upgrade for the night, a union contract, thus a coveted waiver.



Standing-in on *Law and Order*, best acting school in New York

During that third night, about halfway through, as we were all in place in the gallery, watching the hors d'oeuvres tray get slammed, Josh Mostel, Hank Azaria, Gwyneth and Ethan, on the periphery of the set, just out of frame, I see a middle-aged

man, wearing four days' growth of a beard, wearing a tracksuit. He caught my eye because he looked familiar, but I wasn't sure. After a minute or two, and a closer look, I realized who it was: one of my all-time acting role models and on-screen heroes, *Rupert Pupkin*, *Travis Bickle*, and *Jimmy Conway*, none other than the man himself, Mr. Robert De Niro. At the moment I recognized him, adrenaline peaking even higher, it seemed he was looking at me too, and smiling, a nod, a sort of thumbs-up gesture. What a thrill, and it suggested not only encouragement but something even more rewarding.

Yes, as I stood online to check out, handing in my contract for an AD's signature before heading home just before the break of dawn, the guy sitting behind the desk doing the clerical work ADs do at that point, looked up for a second, checked the name against his list, then tore up my contract and handed me my first waiver, a SAG contract. Finally! Saints be praised. Why me? I don't know. Probably just a random selection, but after nearly a year and dozens of hard-sought gigs, definitely one down, the hardest, and now only two more to go. All hail Zeus and Hera! A breakthrough at last! Up ahead? That's light coming at me from the far side of the tunnel. Did DeNiro put in the word for me? I highly doubt it; he just stopped by to check out the scene. His character had no part in that one, and it's unlikely he was even smiling at me, let alone telling the AD's anything on my behalf. But these

events no doubt were correlated if not causal, and so I was on my way to Canaan Land.

My scene partner for the three nights, the affable Magda from Poland, more a model than an actress who kept us both laughing between takes, mostly by ridiculing my headshots in such a way that the both of us were laughing, she imitating my posture and pose, even managing to return a bit of fire about her so-called ‘modeling’ qualifications, she got her three, which meant little or nothing to her—the most significant detail being that she made a rather nice chunk of change for the gig but was now a ‘must join’ - meaning she could no longer work SAG gigs as a nonmember; she’d have to pony up the approximately \$1,200 initiation fee if she wanted to play on that field again. I had no such option, and though I was grateful for my one, I was pissed about not getting the other two. We were there for the same number of hours over the same three nights, doing the same action, but because she was hired as a ‘model,’ that was the deal made with her agency. So it may have been kosher, but it still wasn't fair. The next day, I called the SAG office to question and complain about it. Whoever picked up the phone, after hearing me out and catching my drift, said: “*What do you want us to do? Take hers away?*” No, of course not. But what I said had to be said, I felt. So, I said it; it was heard. I had my one and was very grateful and relieved by that, and as a bonus, I made the final cut, another split second of fame to add to my actor’s life legacy.

Number two

Along with Sylvia Fay was another big-time rocker in the background field, a ‘dark prince’ by the name of Grant Wilfley. I call him that because he was so tall and regal-looking with his *de rigueur* black turtlenecks and deadpan expression, you barely ever heard him speak; he had a staff of hard-working acolytes to speak for him. But when he did, it was quiet, just above a whisper, like the Woodman. He had no need to be expressively loud, as it was his call who worked and who didn’t. That’s what mattered, that power, not the tone, timbre, or volume of his voice and everyone knew it.

Now, here’s the thing: there are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of actors competing for dozens of jobs every day. Like I said and bears repeating, people will drive from out of state, hours away, maybe even sleep overnight the day before just to get on a film set, be it television or a feature film. Naturally, given the law of supply and demand, the competition is endless and relentless. To be one of the select few who gets the call, not only do you need to get on their radar by registering with their office (the easy part), but you need to stay on their radar and do so without annoying them—a much more delicate and sensitive task.

The regular, once-a-month ‘open registration’ days for new entries to the scene are the only times actors are permitted to

visit the office without an explicit invitation, and then it's a quick, one-time meeting. You fill out a form; you give them your headshot; they take a Polaroid; you say 'goodbye,' and that's it. You're not even allowed to call them, unless it's a return call. But none of that, the meeting, the headshot, contact form or Polaroid will keep you on their radar. Out of sight, out of mind, as the saying goes. So, the rules had to be broken, but how do you break the rules without breaking the relationship?

By calling in cold, "*This is Rob Kabakoff, just checking in for work,*" you needed to brace for an icy: "*You know Rob, we have a no call-in policy. Don't call us; we'll call you.*" Click. Or even more daring (and stressful), about once a year I'd work up the chutzpah to just show up unannounced, knock on the door then step in before anyone had a chance to say: '*Go away. we don't want any!*' and say 'hello'. The suite door was closed but, tellingly, I suppose, never locked. You see, it's not always a bust. You might be calling in or showing up at just the right moment when they're stressed looking to fill a last-minute call for the next day's big shoot, and you fit exactly the type they need right now; it happens, so they overlook the breach, and you get booked. But that's rare and comes with the risk of annoying them so much they put your headshot at the bottom of the stack. Usually, I'd come armed with some fresh bakery pastries or a tin of fancy cookies, and as soon as I walked in, announce: "*I know. I know. You were just thinking about me,*" making them smile before they had a

chance to bark. It's hard to be angry at someone who just made you laugh and brought you cookies, and the good vibe lingers. Anyway, as I said, either way, I hated doing it; Willy Loman on the downhill slide, but it had to be done.

The prince himself wouldn't be in the main reception room; he'd be in his office towards the rear of the suite, but with the door partly open so he could keep his eyes and ears on the employees and watch who was coming and going, but without unnecessarily interfering. His staff of young people, maybe five or six casting agents, carefully selected (lots of competition there too), manning desks and phones in the central room, just beginning their careers, handled everything on the talent end. His primary function was most likely getting and maintaining the contracts with the big networks and studios.

Anyway, for my part, I tried not to overdo it, and there were plenty of casting agencies that needed keeping up with, so I made the rounds, rarely and briefly, but this time, one of the few, well, while still a non-union schlep, I got it right. They were looking to fill a courtroom gallery for a major scene in a big-budget film titled "*The Devil's Advocate*" (1997), starring my number one inspiration and role model Al Pacino and his sidekick, whose appeal and talent escapes me, Keanu Reeves. They were both going to be there; it was a pivotal moment in the story, and it would be directed by the very talented and successful Taylor Hackford, the guy who directed the

masterpiece documentary about Cassius Clay and his famous rumble in the jungle with George Foreman, “*When They Were Kings*”, which, coincidentally and ironically, I had just recently seen. Instead of barking at me or chewing me out for the intrusion, they put me on. I was psyched. This was going to be a great day, and it was.

Now, the thing to know about the waivers is that they are given out only of course when they’re available, and pretty much only by the ADs, the assistant directors, and totally at their sole discretion. That meant ingratiating myself to them. How? Well, since most of us were straight, and I had no boobs or suggestive smiles to flash so had to come up with an alternative. For example, aside from discreetly telling them quick, slightly off-color jokes in a somewhat hushed tone (creating a private matter), jokes they would remember and me along with them (*What does the red dot on an Indian woman’s forehead mean? Coffee’s ready!*) “*What do you call a black guy in a space suit? An ‘astronaut’, you racist!*” “*Every morning after a bad night drinking I have to wake up and ask myself: who is this woman in my bed? And why is she dead?*”). Today, lower Manhattan by the court houses, it’s the dead of winter, and it’s a lunch break during the shoot. For some reason it was designated to be a ‘walk away’ lunch, meaning not catered, meaning the clock stopped but there’d be a slight bump in pay to cover the cost of a sandwich and a drink, that meant a trip outdoors in the cold. Being that the courtroom was right next to Chinatown, a pint of hot Wonton

soup was on the menu. “*Shawn, can I get you any Chinese while I’m out there?*” “*Sure, Rob, that’ll be great. Make it wonton with an egg roll, please. Thanks.*” Like that. Even if he had no waivers to give out that day, it was never a certainty anyway unless like with the models, part of the compensation package offered, also a rarity, he would remember me on the next shoot, or the one after, or after, but eventually he’d have one, or more, and the hot and sour soup would prove a worthwhile investment. It’s basically the same ADs and PAs on almost every shoot, the New York people who work all the big gigs, so it becomes a de facto community of supporting players in the local film industry.

Aside from the waiver concern, there was the thrill and the privilege of watching these people perform, arguably the world’s best and certainly most known, and I saw some amazing things. For one, Keanu kept blowing his lines, and every time he did so he’d emit a loud, weird animal-like groan or cry, practically a shriek. Again and again, until after maybe five or six takes he finally got it right. That was funny, but also as I said, weird. You’d think a professional at his level might have a more dignified way of responding to his repeated, and costly failures, but you’d be wrong. And Mr. Hackford show’d him all the patience he didn’t show the extras seated in the front seats of the gallery, closest to the action. After one take he literally blew his stack at a few of them who appeared to be asleep in their seats, actually having them removed and replaced. It was a very early call time,

maybe as early as 6AM, and speaking for myself, it's hard to get much sleep the night before due to the exciting prospect of the action expected on the day to come, so I can imagine why they might have dozed. And I can also understand why they were unceremoniously, in fact angrily replaced. Though it may seem relatively unimportant, the extras role, it's not. Their reactions give important cues to the audience about what is happening and how it is intended to be experienced. This was not a sleeping scene; this was a pivotal moment everyone needed to look very alive and very engaged. Infact, I can't recall any other time that a director became visibly angry, or even that involved with background actors. It's almost always the ADs assigned that task, and that would be the second or second-second ADs.

Another weird thing was the sudden appearance of 'the fat lady.' Yes, as the big Al character, the devil, was making his closing argument, between takes (Al never blew any lines) a fat lady, literally, an extra large opera singer suddenly appears on set, gets kissing close to the big guy and belts out a single piercing note you could hear all the way through the hallway to the elevators. No warning, and no explanation. As soon as she's done holding that long, loud, ear shattering note, she exits the set, then a beat later Taylor's first AD yells "*Action!*" No one said a word about it. Everyone acted like it didn't happen, like it was some sort of group hallucination or mirage. Weird. Later, I surmised that the point of the exercise was to

somehow shake Mr. Pacino up. Why did he need to be shaken up? I can surmise nothing, but I guess that's showbiz too.

No. I never got a waiver that day, but maybe a month or two later, on the next set where Shawn was working his usual AD gig and he had one, and after another reminder joke or two (“*What do you say to a black man in a three piece suit? The defendant will now rise*”), it was joyfully handed over and gratefully received. An actors gotta’ do what an actor’s gotta’ do. Back on the Devil set? I did though, as the production broke down for a meal break, get to have a brief word with Mr. Hackford. I had just seen him a few nights before on Charlie Rose talking about the boxing film, and was able to whole-heartedly convey appreciation of it as both a fight and documentary fan, so that was fun and rewarding too. He was gracious, for the moment I wasn’t a humble *extra* speaking out of line to a lofty director, I was a fellow fan talking to an artist and fan. The chance to express myself like that directly to the source of artistic inspiration was a priceless privilege that I took advantage of as often as the opportunity presented itself. From the stunning beauty of Raquel Welch to the earthy charisma of Gérard Depardieu, I got a chance to give back a bit. This was not sycophancy; I barely even introduced myself, probably, as per my usual, neglected to altogether, it wasn’t about me. The praise was genuine, it was about appreciation, and the occasion to express it directly was earned, both the content and the opportunity.

Oz, another dose of surreal

Getting back to Sylvia Fay and her quiet, always professional nephew Lee who looked like either a friendly, happy Smurf or a mean one, you had to keep on your toes and not take his warmth for granted, but really a very decent guy, and their laconic associate, another soft-spoken but beefy gentleman named Marco from Bensonhurst, that kind of associate, their office gave me a call one day about a new HBO project going into production shortly that needed a lot of background actors for recurring work as - wait for it... prison inmates. Hmmm... They wondered, *who in our files would look like they might fit in, or maybe even actually had been in prison?* Well, I didn't have to wait long for that call. As anyone that might have read Volumes I and II knows, I was no stranger to the inside of a jail cell. In fact, from about fifteen years old onward, I made semi-regular appearances in them, and the most recent only a few years before, one in Toms River, New Jersey, the Ocean County Correction Center, a mere six-week skid-bid for that second return to madness involving a firearm. Anyway, they went through their files and collected about twenty or thirty headshots and summoned us to meet her diminutive, royal highness, the tough as granite, no-nonsense queen, like a Joan Rivers without the humor, Ms. Fay herself at the studio downtown for an in-person briefing. This was the only time I ever heard of her addressing a group of background players

directly. She, like the dark prince Grant, saved the face-to-face encounters for her underling staff. The studio was constructed in a huge, old, pre-war, eight-story, red brick and concrete warehouse on the chi-chi lower west side, the top floor so as to limit the unwanted sounds leaking in from other enterprises. The lower floors now hosted restaurants and upscale haberdasheries and a luxury health spa for people who had time for that sort of weekday indulgence, so it was a happening spot with a lot of coming and going most of the time, but no one came up to the top floor unless they had business there, meaning mainly the cast, crew and production services. They built the inside of a modern prison, the cells, the metal tables with attached steel seats, the shared living space, and an inner, two-story, glass and steel observation deck in the center; it looked as real as could be, in other words, sterile and creepy. Nothing *Shawshank* or Erie County about it. She gathered us to proclaim “*You all need this,*” and that it was an opportunity, a rare one, to be in on the ground floor of a new series, one that we could all benefit from, starting right away and possibly in the long run too, which would also mean regular work, maybe two or three days a week, maybe more, which was music to most of our ears, even us non-union hangers-on, maybe especially to us, a 'mustard seed' from which greater things might grow. At the very least, those paychecks would definitely count towards Unemployment, another vital lifeline in the hi-diddle-di-di actor's life.

Everybody, all us inmate-looking actors were gratefully on board when the work started the next week, season one, episode one. There I would meet up again with another AD I bought soup or coffee for somewhere along the line, maybe quietly told a few racy jokes to, another southern California surfer type, Chris Swarthout, and sure enough, once a SAG voucher became available, the prize was won. Part of my routine was to ask at checkout after the end of each shoot day, as if it might have been overlooked (doubtful), “*Any waivers?*” and was usually told, “*No. Not today, Rob,*” until the day a month or two in when he paused before answering, shuffling some papers while looking puzzled, selected one, then looked up at me and asked, “*Rob, is this yours?*” holding it up in front of me, and there it was, already filled out, waiting for my signature. It had been almost a year, maybe longer since the Lotto commercial, and now it was two down and one to go.

“*Scuddy*”

Back in Ocean County, when in my madness I assumed the role of bodyguard, carrying an unlicensed pistol as part of the *de rigueur* uniform and accessories, I got busted walking through the metal detectors at the front entrance gate of Great Adventure where one summer day in August I had brought a beautiful, young Israeli girl at her stubbornly repeated request. I never wanted to go there, and had a bad feeling about the

place from early on, but Tziona, the dark-eyed, Yemenite descended niece of the folks who owned the Cedarhurst kosher pizza and falafel place insisted, and you know how that goes. Meanwhile, she thought her escort was merely a swashbuckling independent Five Towns trucker, with no idea he was presently more of a profoundly off-centered loon, besieged with delusions of grandeur, imagining himself some type of undercover hero than anything else like a mere furniture delivery man. It was a pretty paranoid fit of madness, like seated on the bed in Long Beach while the volunteer firemen drilled (Volume II). Opioid addiction will do that, Vicodin ES capped with Dalmane and weed, especially to one prone to that frame of mind to begin with. Fantasy aside, the amusement park had actually been the scene of recent deaths from fires and murders, so the weapon, a twenty-five caliber semi-automatic purchased from my building superintendent, seemed like a practical necessity. It always is in Crazy Land, but I wasn't going to rob the place or shoot anybody other than in self-defense, or hers. That crazy I wasn't. Why I never bothered to try for a license and how I didn't notice the metal detectors elude me, but I didn't, either of them, so that faux pas brought me my third felony conviction and landed me back in the clink for several months later the next calendar year.

Despite all that bad timing, carelessness, and lunacy, I did catch a few meaningful breaks in that case. For one, I made the five-thousand-dollar cash bail right away. Had it been

much higher, it would have caused a delay. I'd still get out, but not right away. So, after coming up with the scratch, I was released at the police station before being checked in at the local county joint, and the judge? Well, let me back up a bit. Now in emergency repair mode, I hired a local Ocean County good ol' boy lawyer, correctly figuring he'd have the connections and clout to get me the best deal possible. There would be months out on bail before the hearing and sentencing dates, so there was time to prepare for another stay in the monkey house, which was all but a certainty. It was only a matter of for how long: days, months, or years. There was no plausible way to beat the case; I was disarmed at the scene by an entire squad of private security people, all of them witnesses, cameras backing them up too. Though we could have argued it was 'planted' (again, I made no statement), it'd be a very, very tough sell and the penalty for losing at trial would be Rahway, of *Scared Straight* fame. *Fuggedaboutit*.

By now, already in my early thirties, a veteran of incarceration with a number of bids to my credit, I knew pretty much what to expect. I'd probably be okay if I kept my act in line with acceptable jailhouse etiquette, but it was hardly certain; all bets are off in the monkey house, so along with preparing mentally, I immersed myself in a workout routine guaranteed to help boost my confidence when it came time to face the music in the form of a jailhouse confrontation or brawl, or just

even walking in through the outer gate on day one, a moment of truth all its own. Marijuana-fueled push-ups, sit-ups, stretches, and shadow boxing holding 12.5 lbs dumbbells in each fist kept me busy burning off excess energy and weighty anxiety, but the stress was still palpable, building, and inescapable.

The judge who heard the case agreed to a plea bargain; in exchange for a guilty plea, it would be a fine (maybe three thousand?), a term of probation (maybe three years?), and a two-month (or ninety-day?) minus ‘good time’ stretch in the county lockup. The break became clear on sentencing day, around two months after the arrest, when already seated on the bench, the judge was handed my rap sheet apparently for the first time (“*It’s easy to see where this line is headed*”, see Volume II). There, much to his unpleasant surprise and deep jurisprudence chagrin, he saw that it wasn’t my first gun charge, that I had been convicted in Nassau County, New York, almost a decade before, and sentenced to a year’s confinement on a weapons charge, an altered (sawed-off) one to boot. You’re not supposed to get a lighter sentence and less time for the second offense for the same charge than you did for the first, but he didn’t know about it until he’d already agreed to the deal. I guess his clerk wasn’t thorough enough, and he was pissed off and loud enough about it for the whole courtroom to hear. But again, a deal was made and a deal would be kept. “*Guilty as charged, sir.*” The third break came

when I was already inside. Before I get to it, permit me to back up once again.

Next stop, Ocean County Jail & Corrections Center

It was a very bleak, lightly snowing, frozen dead of a January night, an otherwise peacefully silent 4am when a boxy, white Volvo, an older diesel model from when they were still odd-ball cool, was idling in front of my apartment building, windshield wipers on slow speed, patiently waiting for me to come out and get in. It's my best buddy at the time who just so happened to be a sergeant in the NYPD, but our friendship began much before that. In fact, I think we first crossed paths as he was either just getting started with it or just maybe considering it, law enforcement, but our paths crossed in some interesting ways and a bond was formed, both of us adrenaline junkies though we fed it in different ways, while it was the same hunger for risk.

He preferred to balance his with the fortification of job security and attachments to big outfits like the civil service and the Catholic Church, and I prefer mine in the form of independence and free association, but we both get our kicks, seeking them out, and we both liked the ladies and our motorcycles so there were those shared rushes too, which

alone and by themselves, count for just about everything guys like us really need in life in our twenties.

Sergeant Paul, a blond-haired, beach boy, surfer meets the Pat Buchanan-type, was no stranger to books either, novels, paperback fiction, he'd always be into one or the next, usually the trendy ones like *Bonfire of the Vanities* and Michael Crichton best sellers, as well as real-life drama like skiing black diamonds off-hours for recreation. So, his needs were met in a variety of somewhat reasonable ways and somehow balanced out the fact that not everyone is required to put their lives on the line as part of their day-to-day routine eight-hour shifts.

The motorcycle does most of the physical part for me, the ride so seductive and rewarding, the thrill of the wind, the power at total command, that throttle, flying forward on a fuel-fed iron pony, like his shaft-driven, water-cooled 750 Magna, everything on it a manifestation of balance and intention, a mind and a will driving the force and acceleration of a powerful machine, and as always, movement. It's worth the risk, but that's where it starts for me and ends for me as a form of high-risk physical recreation. His kind, a cop, sets it apart, so he had a range.

Anyway, this morning his range included taking me on a one-way drive about three, maybe four hours south down the Jersey shore from Woodmere, Long Island, to a town called Toms River where I had an appointment that morning. A

command performance, and one I was not very eager for. Not in the least. Paul, a loyal trooper who had even shown up to bolster my trucking team ranks when the jobs demanded added manpower, busting his back to get the job done right, was taking me to the Ocean County Jail where I was scheduled to begin the sentence on that second, return-of-the-lunatic gun charge, the 2 or 3-month bid minus whatever ‘good time’ they allow, but I’d be there long enough to have to adapt, that was certain, and take my word for it, as a veteran, that's not a happy prospect, but I had no better choice. Either show up, do my time, get out and start again, or take off, blow the five thousand and commit to life as a fugitive at thirty-three, just like that shrink told my parents would happen when I was only fifteen (Volume I). He saw it coming, the good doctor. So, even in my befogged state, not such a tough call, I’d skip that, that fat lady hadn’t sung on my set yet. Thus, the solemn car ride on the edge of a frozen, winter night.

And so, we set off. I piled a significant mound of Vicodin ES (never forget the “ES” when ordering from your local druggist) and sedatives on the open glove compartment hatch, took a healthy swallow of hot coffee from a large cardboard cup, and downed a fistful. By the time we got to our destination, I was feeling no pain and only a modest, tolerable degree of apprehension, figuring it wasn't Attica, or Rahway, or Sing Sing, and felt somewhat strengthened by the notion that I was now doing the right, maybe even honorable thing by

showing up. After all, I could have taken the “*Come and get me, coppers!*” route and bought a plane ticket to parts unknown, maybe even France from where there is no extradition, but, like I said, that just didn’t square with how I saw the first day of the rest of my life. There’s no safe return from that, so, *non, mon ami*. I’d just have to face and deal with it, come whatever.

On the trip down there, Paul handed me a gift I treasure and carry with me until this day, a police sergeant's gold ‘courtesy shield’ with his badge number on it. It wasn’t a get-out-of-jail-free card, but it was perhaps even more meaningful. It meant *I respected you before* (the fall) *and I respect you now* (in free flight). That was a vote of confidence if I ever needed one, and I did need one. That’s a friend indeed. Anyway, with all that rushing about in my nervous system and thoughts, I stepped out of the Volvo and knocked on the jailhouse door.

Once they processed me in and directed me to the assigned block and cell, I hit the rack and slept for almost thirty-six hours straight. Knocked out, it wouldn’t have surprised any coroner examining my body that I never woke up, carrying the heavy chemical load I was. By the time I returned to consciousness, I was summoned to an office where, after a brief interview and some sort of psychological profile, they gave me my third break. Despite the heavy charge and the light sentence, they’d house me off-campus in the nearby

work farm, where around thirty or forty inmates basically dormed in a painted cinder block barracks, not cells, and went off to county work details each morning, six days a week, not stuck on the block playing cards or chess, watching the idiot box, and doing the best one can to avoid getting one's clock stopped by having his head bashed in.

At one point during the transfer from the jailhouse to the work farm, they put me in a larger, temporary holding cell with an inmate who was transferred from a state pen to the county for a court appearance. This long, dark-haired, heavily tattooed, and muscular biker-looking white guy had the look of a pure predator convict, and I'm sure he was. Picture a beefier Sonny Barger in his prime, an unapologetic bad guy through and through, like that other Big Paul back in the Nassau County lockup (see Volume II), only not at all friendly. In fact, just being that close to him was an experience of raw fear, exuding a cold-blooded threat, a pitiless, caged tiger with none to offer, just punishment and pain generated by a life of tough breaks, bad influences, and an inborn wild streak. All I could do was hope he wouldn't notice me, a stretch because there were only two or three inmates in that holding cell at that time. But his presence reminded me of how lucky I was that the judge hadn't known about my earlier conviction; otherwise, we might've ended up cellmates in a prison populated entirely by that type, and now I was about to get another play, if I could survive long enough to get there. Anyhow, I'd use this later on

while working the sets as a jailbird, of which now that I was a regular on *Oz*, would be plenty.

The work farm barracks weren't so bad; the COs were relaxed; it was an easy gig for them, and most of the inmates appreciated the break, so they weren't likely to blow it by acting the fool in any way—like a fistfight or an escape attempt. Most of the other inmates were there for nonviolent offenses: failure to pay child support, scofflaws, deadbeats of one sort or another. There was even a neatly bearded, dark-haired and soft-spoken, college history professor in my room who was there for his moonlighting gig: regular runs with speed boats full of marijuana from the Bahamas to the Keys, then up 95 to Jersey, where the last time he was pulled over in his sports car by the state troopers. Probably speeding. “*Catch me if you can, coppers!*” That kind of *crazy*. The dude just loved the thrills of the high-stakes risk; a successful run might score him a year's salary as a teacher, so it overpowered his reasoning, and to him, a prison bid was just a cost of doing business.

At one point, he gave me “*The Shawshank Redemption*”, a novella by Stephen King to read, years before the film, which I devoured, so it was a fairly relaxed place for a jailhouse; I'd been to far worse. There was a big color TV in the day room, universal exercise equipment, and even a ping pong table. All that was missing was a bar and Hooters girls serving drinks and burgers for it to have been more like the Delta's frat house

than Shawshank, but I was able to navigate it as it was. There, I was a novelty, a New Yorker on a gun charge, so I got attention and even some respect just for being who I was. “*What the hell were you carrying an unlicensed pistol for?*” To which I gave the short answer, “*I dunno, I just like guns. That’s all.*” An answer they could relate to.

Every morning at about seven-thirty AM, after breakfast, they’d pack us into a couple of vans and drive to the day’s job site: painting the interior of a coast guard barracks, clearing weeds from a cemetery, collecting litter dumped on the parkway, that kind of labor. Nothing too strenuous, but certainly humbling. The toughest part was the shame; it was often in public, like on the highways; all the passersby knew exactly who and what we were. That hurt deeply. My greatest fear was not getting my head split open; I could handle myself with this crowd, but the thought of being recognized by someone from Arkay Trucking or a former girlfriend passing by was devastating. “*Hey! Isn’t that the guy who just delivered our bedroom set?*” or “*Look! Isn’t that Arkay?*” But it didn’t happen, at least not to my knowledge, and even if it had, there was nothing I could do about it except try to keep as low a profile as possible while outdoors, always facing the crew, never facing outwards to the public. Luckily, we’re not talking orange jumpsuits, rather blue jeans and denim jackets embossed with the mandatory black lettering on the backs, “OCCC” for Ocean County Corrections Center. That was the best I could do.

Everything was going pretty much routine up until the Iraq War, Operation Desert Storm. That first night, '*shock and awe*,' when the air force started dropping bombs all over Baghdad, against which they had no defense, was a moment of pride for us. We didn't consider the powerless civilians, the infants, children, and old people torn to shreds by Cruise missiles; we blocked all that out. All we thought about was America; our country was at war, and we would reign supreme in the sky, sea, and land. Saddam and his Republican Guard were toast. Burnt toast. He challenged us. He'd regret it. A catastrophic miscalculation, misinterpreting a side remark by the US president as a green light on the invasion of Kuwait. According to Baathist doctrine, Kuwait was a made-up, utterly contrived state anyway that never existed before World War One, 'province nineteen,' of Iraq he called it, whereas Babylon's existence predates all of written history, so who the hell were they to keep his oil just because France and the UK decided so; a bunch of pampered princes totally reliant on non-Muslims for military, economic, and political support. Especially after he had spent the last seven years, and at great expense in Iraqi blood and treasure defending them from the Iranian, Shiite, Persians. I got that, but he threatened to march across Jordan to 'liberate' Jerusalem too, i.e., a war of annihilation against the Jewish state, so he overplayed his hand and would now pay the price, a shattered country lost by a brutal, now shattered regime. At lights-out, we spontaneously began whistling the Star-Spangled Banner,

maybe a bit off-key, but clear enough. Funny, the effect war has on people. We weren't just inmates anymore, petty criminals picking up trash on the highway, no, for the moment, the war elevated us, on top of and perhaps superseding our lowly status, we were all Americans, and proud patriots as well. At least that was how I saw it and felt.

That was also when I earned the nickname *Scuddy*, as in Scud missiles, as in the ones Saddam sent rocketing to and hitting Israel. The ones he threatened to load with poison gas, like the kind Uncle Sam gave him to 'balance the terror' with Iran, to which Prime Minister Shamir warned, "*our response will be demonic.*" Demonic. Let that sink in. In the evenings, after chow (decent enough and plenty enough), as we watched the "shock and awe" war on TV, I'd go berserk, yelling and screaming with each missile strike, like they were hitting me, or at the very least my backyard. They never saw anything like it; someone so involved with and connected to events happening thousands of miles away that he actually felt it, even vicariously. Now, the gun charge made more sense to them. Scuddy was half unhinged. Scuddy might even shoot. Scuddy probably would shoot. Scuddy needed to be incarcerated and got a play with only the sixty-day bid. Scuddy would be going home soon. The world had to watch out for Scuddy. Scuddy, the otherwise cool guy, was actually a bona fide menace.

Now, here's the thing: Not once during that term did I ever consider dialing back my madness. There weren't any pills or weed to dull me, and certainly no booze available. I hadn't had a drink since that night of the one-man gunfight in Rockville Center (Volume II), almost a decade before. I was as sharp as I ever could be, yet still considered my current trajectory the right path, albeit with an expected or unexpected detour here and there. Guns are as American as apple pie and eagle claws, no? Guns birthed our country, along with noble ideals. I was on a tear, and the tear wasn't over. Not even close. I'd all but bury myself — broke, wounded, and alone except for the unwashed, homeless, European riff-raff under the boardwalk in Tel Aviv — before finally calling the raging, hedonistic, and ruinous abandon, along with its inevitable fallout, a wrap almost a year later.

What precipitated the fall? How to become an un-self-made man? You might wonder. That's a story by itself, one I probably won't tell, but I will sum it up by stating as candidly and clearly as I care to, that it was mostly due to bad programming. Very bad programming, programming installed by a cult disguised as a do-gooder society. A do-gooder society I joined up with shortly after release from the county lockup, upon completing that first weapons conviction term; a society that requests its members to maintain a principled discretion, i.e., anonymity, one of its few principles I continue to respect and adhere to. That deeply embedded programming involves cultivating and nurturing a long-term, if not lifetime,

psychological dependency on them. Thus, as I cut to the chase, when the fantasy foundation revealed itself as a mirage and collapsed, the damage done cost me that third felony conviction, the second gun charge, and with it, a career in law enforcement (“*You didn't learn the first time?*”), which again, is what brought me to criminal justice school. That, and of course, the late, great rabbi.

Three strikes and you're IN!

“*Copland*” (1997): It's an exterior crowd scene, still a bit of a rush, but my least favorite, one among probably two hundred people loitering about. Not much immortality there. It was basically like the *Daylight* shoot, only daytime and not as cold, and ‘B’ Unit. No movie-star leads there that day, just the choreographed movement of a mass of people. You’re a smudge of a blur. In this case, it was an overhead shot, the camera in a helicopter filming the crowd. I had no idea plot-wise what the crowd was assembled for, why, or for whom, and it didn’t much matter. What mattered was the bigger picture. The outfit that booked me there as a nonunion extra, Amerifilm Casting, was on the scene, basically just checking people in and out, but not the owner, a first-class pro, Meredith Jacobson. She sent her top lieutenant, a gangly brunette female artsy-type in her thirties, another up-and-comer with a good eye who seemed to get a kick out of me and my hungry, New York-actor routine, but whose

name escapes me. Anyway, I was in pretty good with them, never late, polite, no headaches on set, never a no-show, no muss or fuss. And now as the First AD, Chris Swarthout again, who knew me from many of the other recent shoots including *Oz* when he gave me number two a few months before, together on set they both knew I was committed. In fact, there was a solid group of steady non-union players just starting out who helped one another with timely information, about seven or eight of us in total, e.g., who's booking what, when to call, what to say, who to ask for, etc. As a member of that crew too, all of us deeply committed to getting those waivers, we encouraged one another along the arduous way, until inch by inch, one at a time after months turning to years, we all collected them. But I have to tell you, it was a very intense hustle. No gimmes like Magda the 'model' got. At the end of that day's shoot, a brief one, Chris and Meredith's tough but sweet on-site rep, *Kathy La Blanc*, approached me at the front edge of the crowd just after the PAs yelled: "*Checking the gate. And, it's a wrap!*" "*Him?*" she quietly asked the AD. "*Yeah,*" he answered. She nods. Then, Chris to me: "*How many more waivers do you need?*" "*Just one, sir,*" already smiling, hopeful but not certain. First ADs and casting people don't normally interact with the background on sets, so I knew something was up, probably something good. It had been nearly two years and close to two hundred non-union extra jobs since that first Ulysses Terrero gig, standing in the outdoor cold for all-nighters, working for minimum wage,

paying commissions on it to the agencies, no benefits aside from the mandatory state ones, refusing to be discouraged, being relegated to the second-class nonunion food table and the far-from-camera end of group shots, the whole immersion, “*You're gonna name your first child after me*” he jokingly boasted, “*Here it is.*” And just like that, *voilà*, number three and finally, I was in.

It was a Friday afternoon, and the SAG office up on Broadway closes at 5PM, and they only take the twelve-hundred-dollar initiation fee in cash — no checks, no credit cards, just greenbacks, that’s it. To get my hands on that kind of cash before 5PM that very day required digging into my credit and writing myself a check to cash at my bank, then repaying it afterward — that is to say, after my admission to that prestigious, professional union or ‘*guild*’ as the formalists like to call it, exactly what I did. At around 4PM or later, with no time to change into a track suit and sneakers, that involved actually running in my dress slacks and loafers at New York speed to the office from the bank a few blocks away to make it into the building, up the elevator to the forty-fourth floor, and to the cashier’s window, with the cash and my three waivers in hand before they closed. It could have waited until Monday, but after all the effort and patient perseverance, I wanted to spend the weekend celebrating that momentous milestone and bragging to the team, and the world about the successful conclusion to that arduous and uncertain rite of passage. By this time, most of us were either already in or, like me just the

day before, well on the way. Tenacity. Endurance. Success. It was a run I was long prepared to make, so when the chance came, I flew. The deal was done. After providing all my ID and signing all the paperwork, they gave me my SAG number and a very cool lapel pin with their Greek theater masks logo and the words *Screen Actors Guild* on it. Then, just like that, I finally arrived — the former trucker and part-time gigolo was now a professional actor. Hallelujah! Praise the gods, Zeus, Athena, and especially Dionysus. Look at me, everybody! I did it. The Tin Man gets his heart, the Cowardly Lion his medal, and the Scarecrow his diploma! *Hi-diddle-di-di! An actor's life for me!*

Chapter IV: *Detective wannabe never was*

Amid all this relentless hustle, there was that other track demanding full attention and participation. The thinking was, if I don't make it as an actor—a long shot for anybody, especially when starting out in one's thirties—then I will at least have earned a college degree and be able to make my way into some kind of criminal justice gig. Beginning with that process server idea, watching my TV star-faced housemate do his thing, and coinciding with my involvement with the rabbi and his Kach party, and its tragic ending, I got the idea to become a private investigator specializing in security management.

What does that mean? First up, it meant getting a degree from John Jay, where I'd not only get an education but I'd also make connections in that world. Many of the professors came straight from there; teaching was a retirement job for them—police deputy inspectors, FBI men, even some well-known former cops now larger than life private investigators, like Vinne Parco and Bo Dietl. In all honesty, the adrenaline rush I got from those vibes equaled that of the

ones I got on film sets, perhaps even more. But for now, back to the infamous rabbi.

It was probably not long after that first encounter at the Five Towns' synagogue, maybe only four or five Kach, USA, events later, and once the regulars got to know me, the head of the tribe, the rabbi's point man in the States, Brooklyn-based Tuvia Becker, asked me if I'd come on board and accept the challenge of providing for the rabbi's security while here in New York. It was a bit surprising they'd turn to me; after all, I wasn't a cop, or a strong-arm man, or even a private eye. I was a trucker who had no experience aside from numerous fistfights and assorted violent encounters growing up, but I was obviously a true believer, carried my own weight in life, spoke Hebrew, and had my head on relatively straight. Many of his local followers, primarily but not exclusively American Jews, were, let's say, maybe not the most objective, strategic thinkers on the block. I looked around. I checked the roster. I tried to be honest. After careful scrutiny I concluded that he was right. Out of all the core followers, maybe a few dozen souls, it truly did appear as if I'd be the most qualified to carry that weight too, so I agreed. That meant recruiting, organizing, and managing a team of volunteers to appear at his functions and provide physical security for him. Tuvia would let me know in advance, the where, when, how, and whatever other details were needed, and then it would be up to me to follow through. It actually wasn't that difficult because when I spoke

in his name, the rabbi's, or the rabbi's main man *Tuvia*, people listened, and for the most part, they felt honored, like I did, even to be asked, so building a team and getting them arranged in the locations they needed to be at, maybe as many as a minion of guys or more went pretty smoothly. Nary a no-show, if ever. Along with my package of seemingly valuable skills and talents, I came with my own lieutenant, a sturdy, Jewish, hockey-playing New York City fireman named Joel. Joel's father was a New York fireman, and his mother, a diehard Zionist and quasi-observant Jew, meaning that Joel could be trusted (about as much as anyone can be).

The last time the rabbi needed security, I was told, was at some sort of D.C. conference, probably the National Press Club, where among a room full of reporters, some disgruntled listener, probably a fellow Hebrew, threw a bottle of ink at him. I don't know what the repercussions were, whether the rabbi was hit or not, or if the guy was stopped, held, and charged, but under my watch, it is safe to assume that a guy making that kind of move would never have gotten away. He'd be stopped, held, and charged. That's how I saw my gig, and that's what I set out to do. If not deterrence, then capture. Fortunately, during my close to two-year tenure, no such drama unfolded, but we were prepared in the event anything like that did occur, something like that or something even more grave and threatening. One of my regular guys, a dark-skinned and dark-haired, mustachioed Turkish Jew in his

thirties, was armed with a pistol, a revolver, some sort of *Saturday Night Special*, maybe a .38, as these unregistered handguns were called. Whether or not he was licensed? I never asked because I didn't care. He discretely revealed it to me, and he was on our side; that's all that mattered; that, and keeping the rabbi alive, and dignity intact by ensuring to the best of my ability that he'd have his say and not be locked out or censored during the public discussions. These were the days when he held his Knesset seat and elections were coming, so the expectation was that his party would grow from a single seat to possibly as many as three to five, giving him that 'king-maker' status due to the fact that the rest of the plenum was evenly divided between left and right, Labor and Likud. The best part of the gig though was it got me close to the rabbi. Prior to that, he hadn't the foggiest notion of who I was. That didn't bother me either, at first, because it, the mission, wasn't really about me. No, not really. I was part of it but far from its essence. That would be, in essence, the fate of *am Yisrael*, the nation of Israel.

The first time he spoke directly to me was in a quiet corner of the main ballroom at Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan's Upper West Side. There they held an annual gala for him, a fundraiser to support his political activities in Israel, and it was always a packed house, with hundreds of guests. At some point, Tuvia must have pointed me and Joel out to him and explained our role. That was when Meir Kahane

approached me. He wanted to know if I'd bring a couple of cartons of books for him with me to Israel on my next visit. At that point, I was going twice a year so the next trip was probably coming up in the not too distant future. "*Of course, Rabbi, sure, I'd be honored*" was my succinct and immediate reply. "*Tuvia will give you the books, my personal phone number, and office location on Agrippa Street in Jerusalem. I'll see you there.*"

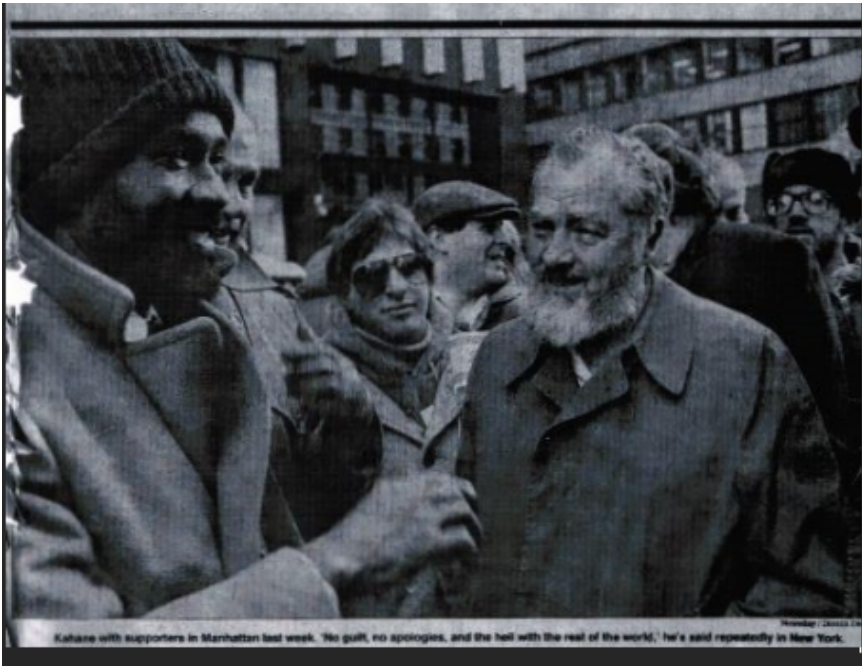
There was another request that came to me during the gala, a *feeler*, so-to-speak, but through another, more discrete channel. Probably not even Tuvia, maybe not even from the rabbi, I can't recall who, or from exactly where, but the request itself is memorable. The way it was communicated to me went something like this: In Israel, under rabbinic law, a couple wishing to divorce must sign a *gett*, both parties. To my knowledge, it is simply an agreement to dissolve the marriage and come to some agreement on the assorted terms, e.g., sharing joint property and child custody. It happens that on occasion, one of the parties, usually the male, refuses to sign it. Maybe he's heartbroken and acting out of spite. Or maybe he doesn't like the terms, but whatever the cause, neither party can remarry without the *gett* signed by both, so there's a dilemma. The specific request was *could I, and my able-bodied associate, help out the party needing but not receiving the gett?* How? Broadly put, by any means necessary. That kind of thing, and there would be pay involved because the receiver of the *gett*, and the receiver's

family would have to pay for that service, it was business, a part of which would then trickle down to those who successfully obtained it. This didn't sound very kosher to me, not at all, for a *gett* to be kosher it needs to be voluntary, not coerced, that's the point, it demonstrates the willingness of both parties to let go and move on, and that particular offer, unlike providing security or acting as a courier, was not the reason I took the position, but I didn't refuse right away either, rather I said I'd discuss it with my lieutenant and we'd get back to them with an answer in due course, which I never did. Though I mentioned it to Joel, he didn't grab it either, but my feeling was that he'd follow my lead since I was the anointed shot-caller here. Why me? While my lieutenant had the kind of carrying people down ladders from a fire type of muscle and the *kavana*, i.e., *intention*, he didn't quite have the necessary brains or helpful charisma, and it was fine with him that way, just like I didn't have the brains or charisma to be Kahane, which was fine with me too.

Anyway, muscling up other Jews for money? Not what I signed on to do. So, I let it go and it never came up again. We did, however, get on that plane with those cartons of books and show up on Agrippa Street with them, where we were warmly received by the man himself. There he invited us to his next campaign rally scheduled for that night in Petach Tikva, the heartland of central Israel, and to actually be up on stage with him and absorb the thrills of that memorable experience, which we wholeheartedly accepted.

That was wild, fun, unexpected, another surreal event, sharing a brief but vivid moment of history with a man *sui generis* and as inspiring as Martin David Kahane. That rally, in the spotlight, hundreds of rip-roaring supporters waving flags and chanting: “*Ka-ha-na! Ka-ha-na!*” was probably the high point of my Kach career. Though my Hebrew was nowhere strong enough to follow his speech, I did catch a phrase or two here and there, and certainly caught the drift: we would no longer tolerate abuse in our own home, and we would apologize to no one for taking whatever steps were necessary to end it. In effect: the L-rd is our shepherd... not the State Department in D.C., not the Kremlin, not Brussels, and not even the Security Council in Turtle Bay, but in Jerusalem, the eternal capital of the Jewish nation, and with that, my energy flowed right along with the enthusiasm of the crowd’s. Just by being up there with him, naturally some of that flow was directed towards the two of us, leaving a permanent impression, not exactly an anodyne Five Towns *aliya* at a bar-mitzvah energy, more like an apocalyptic call to the heavens from the Promised Land energy. That was a whole nother kind of rush indeed. We were heroes, a couple of hearty American Jews came to lend a hand fighting the good fight. Yet not long after all that celebration of theologic and nationalistic bliss, what do you know? As could clearly be anticipated given the facts and circumstances of how the Brooklyn-born savior conducted his public life and broader campaign, a low point would then follow barely a

year later back in New York City, from whence the great rabbi came.



On the job, winter '88, 7th Avenue, *Newsday*

As a standby aside, allowing a big target to be hung on one's back without the proper resources to defend oneself in place is not the way to live a long and productive life, which is, after all, the name of the game as I see it. What comes in between the first and last breath is what that life is composed of: the effect one's choices and actions have on the world, big and small, good or not good, its '*meaning*', so to speak. A pointless, premature death, handing your enemies an easy victim, another scalp for the wall or notch on the gunbelt,

without exacting any costs on them, hardly serves any worthwhile purpose.

Back in the big city, a few years later

It's my fourth or fifth semester at school, mid-nineties, and my batting average is 1.000, that is to say the Dean's List for every one. By now, enough professors knew me, and because I was about a decade older than the average day session student and already had some valuable life experience under my belt, they saw me as serious, deliberate, and reliable. Step number two on the agenda, coinciding with the degree program, was obtaining what they call a *Certificate of Relief From Disabilities* from the New York State Department of Parole. The Certificate, if and when awarded, lifts the felony bars in place preventing an applicant from being granted state licenses to certain specified professions, a private investigator's license among them. So, I had to have it, as important to me in its realm as SAG membership was in its. Somehow, I discovered a do-gooder outfit based in lower Manhattan that walked qualified applicants through the process, which first involved being fingerprinted and submitting them to the FBI through an FOIA request for my arrest record. With that, the next stop was the state department of parole, the issuing agency. Once they receive my application and the rap sheet, they'd do their investigation

involving tax records, employment history, address verification, and in-person interviews with not only the applicant but with no fewer than five character witnesses. The Certificate was granted, and I was well on my way, or so it seemed.

The D.O.I., or *Department of Investigations*, in the city, was accepting interns. One had to be recommended by faculty members of the school, after which an interview could be scheduled. The mandate for that agency was rooting out corruption within city departments and agencies, from Sanitation to Purchasing to the courts—each and every one—working closely with the respective department’s Inspector General. All the evildoers would be exposed and brought to justice. This might involve infiltration of these agencies, a sub-rosa investigation where whatever acting skills and street smarts I may have would be put to full use. It was ‘A-game’ time again. They might even give me a badge and a gun; if not police powers, then almost certainly peace officer status. I could easily see myself portraying a crooked attorney bribing a judge, and should that judge be foolish or greedy enough to accept it, then wham-o! Into the slammer he’d go. It happened often enough, and I was psyched for it. Additionally, one needed three years of experience as an investigator in order to qualify to take the test for the state-issued private investigator’s license, so this would be my

stepping stone into that world. My optimism was sky high, 007, here I come. I'm totally in.

The appointment downtown at their headquarters on Maiden Lane, the financial district, was set for a week in advance, so I had time to prepare. A fresh haircut, dry cleaned my slacks, a close shave, shoes shined, maybe even a manicure—all that grooming to boost my confidence, telling myself it's an “*all the world's a stage*” kinda' thing, another role. When the day came, I put on that favorite blazer of mine over a dark gray, merino wool turtleneck, packed my school records and the certificate into a black leather carry bag, and showed up on time, knowing I clearly looked the part, *Serpico* meets *Roy Cohn*, and could pull it off, bright and eager.

There I was met by the guy who would interview me, a long-time, tenured agent who had the patience and skill to ferret out the acceptable candidates from the rest. The guy, a slightly graying, clean-cut, average man's Steve McQueen-looking dude in a tailored suit about a decade my senior, greeted me warmly, shook my hand, introduced himself—another Jewish guy probably from Brooklyn too, a good sign. I'm comfortable and growing even more cautiously confident, and directed me to a compact private room where we both took seats alongside a small conference table. Once we were seated, he got right to business. “*Have you ever been convicted of a crime?*” I was floored right away. I never

expected that to be the first question. I thought I'd get a chance to present myself as a reformed bad guy now do-gooder before we got to that hard sell topic, but I was wrong. That's what he wanted to know first up. There went my confidence, feeling the ship beginning to list.

"Yes."

"For what?"

"A handgun charge back in '82." Almost fifteen years ago. He stops writing and looks me in the eye. It's not marijuana, or a DWI, it's a heavy felony. After a brief pause, *"Okay. Anything else?"*

"Yes."

"And...?"

"About ten years later, another gun charge."

Now he puts the pencil down and without missing a beat says: *"You didn't learn the first time?"* Apparently not. It wasn't a question. It was a statement. Interview over. Ship sank. Shot

down before the start. To say I was crushed wouldn't be overstated. I slinked out of that office a loser who blew it before he even got up to the plate, but didn't know it. Now I was over two years invested in a career I'd probably never get the chance to begin. It hurt. It was painful. It was bad. Devastating bad. The D.O.I. wasn't having me. No silver lining there. None. Just loss, shame, and defeat. But, as we know, us surviving, seasoned veterans of our own debilitating discontent, life goes on.

This was after over two years at the school, full time except for summers, and loving every minute of it anyway, soaking up all the knowledge, experience, and information they had to offer like a dry sponge in a wet well. There was no point in quitting, so I got back up, dusted myself off, and kept on keepin' on. I mean, aside from all that, everything, soup to nuts, was being paid for. After my collapse, the 'relapse' as they call it in twelve-step cults, and still in my early stage of 'recovery', every city, state, and federal agency out there—from Social Security Disability, to VESID to TAP and PELL grants, and now even collecting Unemployment from my background work on film sets—came to my rescue, remarkable generosity to my thinking. Much more than I ever received from family, friends, or anyone else, my good ol' reliable Uncle Sam. None of this aid did I ever expect or plan on. I'd never even heard of most of these programs; they seemed to have just come to me on the route I had already

chosen: survival, rehabilitation, and recovery, beginning again anew. So again, why not take full advantage of what was being offered so freely? No reason I could think of. All they wanted from me aside from transparency was to continue school and earn these credits and work towards my Plan to Achieve Self Support, which was exactly what I wanted to do anyway, D.O.I. internship or not. I was old enough now to know that while one door might close, others down the road will likely appear and open—doors one is not even aware of in the present—disappointing, yes, sure, but no need to despair, and those are the very open doors we seek and walk through. We lick our wounds as we continue to move forward. That's the formula, that's the recipe for a life of meaning, and of *kavana* (Hebrew, intention). So, again, why not?

Backing up again to the late '80s, back to the Five Towns trucker and security manager for Rav Kahana days, an event in his office foretold a rift that would later break the bond that held me so closely to him. Before getting to that, I want to make it clear that my dedication to his protection and survival was total and complete. If I can't play my 'A-game', I don't play at all. Why bother? If that meant getting up before dawn to train it into the city to meet up with my team outside the garment center's main office building—the one with the statue of the old Jewish man hunched over a sewing machine—to meet up with him in the February frost for some type of outdoor press conference, then I'd be there, as would my

organized team. In fact, that moment, just as an outsider recognized and approached him for contact, when I stepped forward and my team drew in close, was captured by a Newsday photographer and added to the published reporting of the event. There I was, center frame, all *kavana*, and plain as day.

After greeting us again warmly, smiles and handshakes, I had come through; here are the cartons (of course, I opened them before carrying them onto the plane; all I saw were books, just as described). I brought up the subject of tenacity. This was the time he was about to be removed from the Knesset, or just had been. I asked him why he just didn't quit. My thinking was that after a rejection like that, and all the lies told about him, the canards and verbal abuse, the slander and threats, why didn't he just pack it in and move to the Bahamas and open up a kosher takeout on the beach? I mean, how much of oneself is a man required to give before he decides it's time to give more of himself to himself and his family than to the grander, perhaps nobler causes of selflessness and sacrifice? How many lives do we get? That's all I meant, but he took it as if I was suggesting he quit. I was not. Not at all. I was wondering about the nature and source of his tenacity, but he exploded with profound exasperation, a quiet, though barely suppressed rage. *I didn't understand him. Did I not hear him? How could I even ask a question like that? Did I not know who he was?* I didn't bother trying to explain myself; he was

not to be interrupted, so I stood silently and listened, respectfully, taking his response for what it was, more evidence of his authenticity, but it left an impression, a personal one. The impression was he probably had no respect for me and certainly didn't understand me. I wasn't doing all this because I expected or wanted him to quit; rather because I considered and expressed it, and he didn't. On occasion, he would deride opponents and critics by referring to them as "*pygmies*" or "*dwarves*," and as I stood under half a head as tall as he, maybe that's why the tantrum stuck and cut. How tall was Ben-Gurion? Or my all-time favorite, Prime Minister Shamir? How tall are you? If that's how you see me, methinks perhaps thou art missing the bigger picture, pardon the pun. But, okay. As I say, it wasn't about me, or them, or anyone's height or lack thereof. Really. So, who cared? My mission was to be of service to him and more broadly the cause itself for which he was simply the outspoken and deeply committed exemplar, until the day I decided it no longer was.

That day came back in New York almost a year later, at the Grand Hyatt on 42nd Street, where another afternoon press conference was scheduled. The gathering, held in a mid-sized conference room at the front of the hotel with windows facing the entrance, consisted of about ten seated reporters facing the speaker and my team, comprising at least that number of security men and supporters along the inner perimeter wall of the room surrounding them, ready to ensure the event

proceeded smoothly. No one threw any bottles of ink; in fact, they were quite respectful (for reporters), only interested in what his next moves might be. The event transpired without any interference at all, for which I took a modest degree of credit. Our presence and intention were obvious and most likely dissuasive in case any of them considered any type of performative disruption, all of us, including me, ready to pounce.

At its conclusion, once the assembly broke up and my team released, I saw the chance to escort the rabbi to his next stop, wherever it might be, get some one-on-one action with the man himself, and maybe explain what I meant by that question back in Jerusalem. To that end, I followed him out of the building and across the street to the subway station, but despite that I was right next to him, just the two of us, he barely seemed to even notice me.

One time, when we were at a *Shabbaton* he was conducting at an upstate New York camping ground, someone in the company offered to buy him a bullet-proof vest. It was clear, even with my best efforts, he wasn't taking his personal security seriously. He responded (I paraphrase): "*In Israel, I need security, and so I have it. Here, I don't need any, so I don't.*" No one quite believed that; it was delusional thinking. Just look at what happened to his pal Joe Colombo, who had far fewer enemies, but he was the number one shot-caller, so

that was that. Even Tuvia looked at me as if to say, “*This is what we’re dealing with.*”

Back crossing 42nd Street to the subway and keeping up with him anyway, once we got downstairs, I had to separate from him to get online to buy a token; he already had his. By the time I made the purchase, only maybe a minute or two later, he was already gone. He went through the turnstile and disappeared into the bustling midtown afternoon crowd. After all the effort and loyalty I showed him, the mere mention of his name—the word “Kahane”—would likely trigger a fit of hysterical responses, mainly from other Jews I'd have to parry. I wasn't even worth waiting a minute or two for companionship on a subway ride to Brooklyn. To him, I was chopped liver. Day-old chopped liver, he'd rather be alone than with me, even after the visit to Jerusalem. That's what I told Tuvia before saying I quit. Look, I knew it wasn't about me, and Tuvia said he understood. “*We all have our Kahana stories,*” he confided, but to remember it wasn't really about him either. It was about Am Yisrael, and the role he played in its destiny. This I got; Tuvia was right, so I agreed to postpone my resignation and stayed on board for another few months, same drill, until entropy set in and I ran completely out of gas. There were others far more qualified than I to back him up, I reasoned. There were pros; money could be spent on armed and licensed off-duty law enforcement people. They didn't really need to rely on volunteers and a ramshackle team of

unvetted groupies. Let's be realistic. Just because he's in denial or has some sort of death wish doesn't mean we have to enable it as well. Spend some money while here in the States; that's what the fundraisers are in part for, no? I mean, they wouldn't even spring for a single, handheld metal detector.



That alone may have saved his life that day a year or so later. So, when the next time came, I resigned in writing, and Tuvia accepted it. I did my best for as long as I could. Now it was someone else's turn. Maybe someone he'd wait for to buy a subway token. Maybe not, but either way, I was done, and at the Marriott East Side Hotel in Manhattan, where I had organized security for him at least once before, in the very same room, on November 5, 1990, so was he. Before that and right up to that

final night, the man put his balls on the line for what he believed, every day until the last minute of the last hour. To his own self, he was true. *Sui generis*. A man who would not back down. That's what brought me to John Jay and a degree in security management.

Chapter V: *life imitates art*

While the Erie County Penitentiary in Buffalo, New York, resembled the Shawshank Redemption more than the eponymous joint in the movie itself, in stark contrast, the contrived set of *Oz* resembled an actual modern-day, state-of-the-art exercise in group incarceration: antiseptic, cold, austere, brightly lit, and always threatening. Worst of all, like the upstate penitentiary of old, it was devoid of females. No estrogen floated around the set. It's a men's prison. In a word? Depressing. But it was still a hell of a lot better being there, an HBO set in lower Manhattan, getting paid for pretending to be an inmate, than being locked up in the other place where I actually served real time for that first gun charge back in '81-2, which, needless to say but here goes anyway, was even more depressing.

As usual, though, for me, I adapted and made the most of it up there. How? Well, if you recall from the earlier volumes, it wasn't my first term of confinement, and as you've just read in this final installment, it wasn't my last either, but it was the longest single stretch up until then, so I progressed somewhat on the '*jailin' it*' learning curve, cleaning my cell right away

and weekly, using toothpaste to cover my walls with ‘*short-eyes*’ (centerfolds), greeting cards, letters, and photos sent by my harem members eager for my release. I shared what extra I had with strategically selected allies and made no threats or borrowed anything I couldn’t pay back, etc., and again, most importantly, always bore in mind that in the state of New York, whatever your sentence, the Department of Corrections has the discretionary authority to cut you loose after serving only the two-thirds minimum. So that means if I didn’t lose my ‘*goodtime*’, I’d be out in eight months instead of twelve.

By that measure, by the time I was transferred up to Buffalo from Nassau County, I was already halfway home, four months down, four to go, and the upstate joint was a pleasure camp compared with the maximum security barnacles of the Long Island lockup. How? Back when it was built, just after the Civil War, it was designed to be more spacious than the current models: the cells were bigger, the common spaces larger, ceilings higher, hallways wider, thicker mattresses and thicker walls, better food and more of it available in a mess hall serving three-hundred at a time, and the yard was much bigger. With a couple of hours of rec a day in its wide-open spaces between guard towers and the sky, there was basketball, handball, weights, chess, cards, and prison-yard volleyball (my pick) which diffused a lot of everyday jailhouse tension. Smack a handball, hard, smack it again,

harder, no problem. But smack an inmate? Problems. Bye-bye ‘*goodtime*’.

Better still? The downstate county transfers were only those inmates serving county time, less than a year and a day, skid-bidders like me, so for us, it was run as a medium-security facility, not a maximum like the county’s where everyone from scofflaws to mass murderers are housed in the same pre-trial units, a relentless pressure cooker of the condemned. You could breathe up there. Even the look of the place, the tile floors and ceilings painted in warmer, darker tones, the granite foundations and iron girders felt more habitable for humans than the merciless steel, chrome and glass on top of the pale yellow, concrete cubicles and narrow industrial-style tile hallways of the Long Island lockup and the set of Oz. It was a place I didn’t feel the need to watch my every step, or negotiate alliances just to keep my “grippers” (see Volume I) gripping, and heart beating.

Tactical alliances

It’s important to recall that in the county lockup, the pretrial detainees are very much a mixed bag of defendant types, ranging from the innocent and falsely accused to cold-blooded murderers there for only a fraction of the crimes they committed but were caught for. So you really needed to watch

your step full-time, every minute, every hour, every day. No time off except when locked in at night, and even then, the fear remains.

Today was the day a thirty-something-year-old big doggie on the tier who called himself “Azim” strutted and fretted his hour on the tier before evaporating into the mist of nearly forgotten memory. Once he checked into the Nassau County Correctional Center and unable to make bail, he converted to Islam so, *abracadabra*, was now a fully liberated, black-skinned, white-hating holy warrior complete with a white, knitted skull cap, prayer rug, and the requisite performative arrogance. Mazal tov.

In reality, he was just another high-school dropout, low-end street criminal in the can from Nassau County, there on some type of petty burglary beef or maybe a daring car theft. But for sure, he was no big-time criminal or gangster, nor did he really try to present himself that way. But he did have very broad shoulders, a muscular build, and a nasty, condescending, threatening attitude. For example, he’d line up his collection of brand-new sneakers in front of his cell like it was a downtown luxury car showroom. He could tell you which year the particular model came out, then spread out his prayer rug in the narrow space between his rack and the cell wall and insist no one walk past his cell while he was praying. That kind of provocative, unnecessary (and ultimately

suicidal) seed must have been planted to produce his own destruction; counter-intuitive but common enough, the trick with these tricksters is not to allow oneself to become collateral damage, or like Woody Allen describes, they're the kamikaze and you're the ship. But this tale comes from when he was still up there in the top spot in the twenty-cell tier and trying to hold on to it.

Before getting to that, a word about *fear*. Specifically, how to cover it up in the joint. B.B. was a very dark-skinned brother from Rockaway, or Jamaica, who got caught up in some beef in Nassau County, so he was here with the rest of us Long Island desperados. A young guy, early twenties, had some type of injury to his right hand which prevented him from being able to write, so he "hired" me to write his letters for him, an offer I couldn't refuse. He'd dictate, and I'd write, then be compensated in the typical jailhouse way with cigarettes.

As a result of this regular exercise, I got to know a bit about his life and relationships, specifically his girlfriend and his mother. So, in a jailhouse sense, we became friends, and the friendship was cemented jailhouse style—with sparring. Since he was trim, probably about the same weight class, a couple of inches taller and with a longer reach, and although a much better boxer, I'd be able to get some shots in—painful ones to his ribs and sides which I'd always have to pay for at a rate of

probably 5 or 6:1 with stinging, blood vessel-busting shots to my arms, shoulders, and chest, similarly as with LaCurta on board the M.C. Fox (see Volume II). As he'd announce with mock fury, "*Kap be tryina' break shit!*," though he usually called me "Cunningham" (from the *Happy Days* television show) because, to him, I looked like my ol' pal Opie.

Anyway, to the point about fear, one day after a brief vocal flare-up with another inmate, another brother, when I saw a sign of distinct agitation in his eyes, he looked at me and quietly advised that if I ever saw fear in his eyes, it was the fear he'd be "*about to kill somebody.*" Check.

On a typical full tier of twenty inmates, there were perhaps only four or maybe five of us, capable white guys—all in our pushup-pounding twenties—not including Wexler, who I'll get to. Because of the jailhouse culture, we mostly played cards together, usually two, two-man Spades teams and an alternating spectator. This particular crew of young, professional career criminals included two burglars, both drug addicts. One specialized in pharmacy break-ins, detailing for us how to map out a police precinct, use the police radio to monitor their locations while considering the number of squad cars active on any given shift, and where to set a fire or some other type of decoy distraction to draw them away from the target before breaking in through the roof and invariably setting off the alarm if the efforts to disconnect the power

source failed. The other *B and E* guy was a lot less sophisticated, more like Big Richie (see Volumes I and II), smash and grab, even in the daytime, even if the owners were at home, but otherwise a lot more socially presentable, as he could otherwise speak in full English sentences, wore a neat short haircut, and had a trim physique unmarked by identifying tattoos. He was a tall Jewish guy and, like me, another middle-class jailbird named Rob. Robert Shechter, to be precise, also from Oceanside. Unlike the next member in our card-click, mostly non-violent though capable—a fully inked, including the proforma ‘FTW’s, ‘69’s, elbows covered in spider webs and snakes penetrating a skull’s eye-sockets, Halloween stuff, a long blond-haired, drug-dealing biker type we called “*Wheels*”, probably a fully-patched Long Island Pagan with a driving lust more for money and violence than for chemical highs. And then there was Big Joe, the main guy, a professional fence, who was possibly an associate of one of the big five New York *cosa nostra* clans, and a wild card outlaw like me.

Joe LaTerra, a white Mighty Joe Young on the tier

In most other circumstances, like one where whites weren’t so heavily outnumbered, and all other considerations equal, the alpha dog would have definitely been Big Joe, very much resembling the iconic caricature of an old-time,

black-and-white-striped, uniformed, chained-by-the-ankle-to-an-iron-ball convict in the flesh, a light complected Italian American lad in his middle twenties from Suffolk County, downstate in the county on another beef he caught while up in Attica, an assault with a deadly weapon charge, stabbing another inmate, possibly to death. We didn't ask. Joe was a big boy, probably 5' 10" and weighing 250-275 lbs., mainly muscle and girth, a massive chest, back, shoulders and arms, wearing a military-style crew cut, a chipped-off front tooth, a local purveyor of stolen merchandise, including Corvettes which he shared his Polaroids of, the man himself.

Naturally, as Joe was a regular in the card game table with the other handful of Caucasian plotters, as the game ensued, talk of his current case came up once or maybe twice. The way he told it, he was surrounded by a handful of smaller black inmates in the laundry room where they all worked, and just as the gang assault was about to be launched against him, or murder, he pulled a knife from its hidden location somewhere on his person, and with it stabbed the nearest, and largest would-be assailant to him, plunged it into his chest who then fell to the floor bleeding before slipping into a coma. *“What happened after that, Joe? Did they jump you?”* *“No. I turned to the rest, still holding the shank and asked ‘Okay. Who’s next?’”*

Enter barefooted Wexler to the tier community. Who, by the name, I presumed to be another landsman, but of the quite disheveled variety. In his mid-twenties, probably a street dweller eating out of restaurant trash cans. We joked in response after asking where his shoes were that “*They gave themselves up.*” Tall, gangly, wild-haired with bad skin, probably there on a minor charge and unable to make bail. But whatever, for some reason, he and Azim didn’t hit it off in any type of way that would permit a peaceful, or simply even benign coexistence. I hadn’t been paying much attention to that particular drama, there were enough in my closest spheres, so, a few days after his arrival, when I saw Wexler on his knees, arms flailing wildly about down at the end of the tier by the exit and showers, pounding on the iron door, Azim pounding his head with the phone receiver, I wasn’t surprised. It was one white dude and one black, one on one, so, despite the racial component, there was no call to jump in. Once Azim tired out, basically the end of the brawl, Wexler, shaken but still alive, and after extended pounding on the tier door, he was removed from the tier and presumably taken for medical evaluation. No one expected him to ever be back. Certainly not on this tier, and certainly not Azim, who believed he had now even more firmly secured his spot as big dog.

Early one afternoon two days later, just after the CO bellowed out, “*Cracking the gate!*” from behind the same iron door, meaning opening the inner tier door electronically - just as the

inmates were settled down into their routines, and our card-playing clique paused between hands to check out who was coming in, the barred door at the far end of the tier rolled open on its noisy track and the wild-haired, beat-up refugee walked back onto the scene of his own volition, neither bragging nor shrinking, like nothing happened. Needless to say, this was a local, jailhouse news headline - a beaten-down white-boy back on his feet and back on the scene. Azim gave him damn near all he had - for at least three or four uninterrupted minutes, maybe longer, including but not limited to the pounding of the top of his skull with that hard, plastic phone receiver, and though his prey got barely a lick in and took the full brunt for sure - he was definitely down but clearly, despite appearances to the contrary, not out. Wexler, given the option, returned unbowed to the scene of the crime from which he fled. They would never have returned him there unless he either insisted or it was by oversight omission, and he just passively went along with it. There are lawsuits when inmates are killed or seriously harmed, and the state has a duty to protect. Just as he passed us by on his way to the old cell he'd call home again, seated at our card station, we began the solemn plotting of a vague course of action which gradually made the specific nature and literal detail of our pact clear. One by one we silently shifted our glances from the game table to Wexler, to one another, to the alpha dog Azim who could barely disguise his shock and confusion with the pathetic attempt to appear not to notice or care as he again

lined up his preposterous and way too clean sneaker collection outside his cell for everyone to pay homage to. With Wexler's surprise return and to our collective mind, instead of dealing out another hand right away, we decided Azim's time and hollow reign had come to an end.

All the preceding was resolved with a minimum of speech. Most of it was understood, and clearly, simply by eye contact, timing, and the known, observable facts at hand. Of course, it would fall to Joe to manage the initial hands-on aspect - he would crush the make-believe Muslim with the absurd sneaker collection, and we were to provide backup and hands-on support, which was certain to be necessary and costly. The brothers would never let one of their own be beaten by any non-black and certainly not by multiple attackers - so we were gonna have our hands full, possibly even more than that, but it was going to happen regardless, Azim's continued insistence on asserting the dominant role would ensure it. It was me who quickly, but quietly, suggested that there was only one goal worth the risk we would take and the price we might pay: "*But he doesn't come back on the tier,*" which everyone understood perfectly. *Wheels* silently responded with an index finger pointing downward, while the two burglars gave a single, slow, deliberate head nod each. Across the table, Big Joe quickly raised his massive right arm, crowned by an open hand, inviting me to a firm palm slap indicating our total agreement. My immediate return slap and the shared

lightning-fast facial acknowledgment by the rest reflected the deadly alliance of card player resolve and refocus. The bond was now ready to be consecrated by the actions we pledged to carry out. Anyway, Azim had it coming to him, that's what we all figured. It's the thing with bullies, they're on top and then someone knocks 'em off and down they tumble like Humpty Dumpty, only flesh and blood not an imaginary eggshell. It comes with the territory, and sometimes the knock comes from someone you'd least expect to bring it, so it was mangy, rangy, gangly Wexler with the big dirty feet who not-so-subtly knocked the mad boy-king off his cardboard throne.

It never *'jumped off'*. Either some of us were moved or released the following day or the COs reshuffled the entire tier again, but that's the way it is in the pretrial housing lotto game. The dynamic shift, everyday a new set of variables and equations to manage and navigate, no rest for the weary. There was a time when Azim stopped by my cell as he was passing and indicated, half-jokingly, more an assertion of dominance than a romantic flirtation, he expected a blowjob from me, to which I responded something to the effect of "*whenever you're ready*", then grinding my teeth into a big exaggerated grin, indicating that whatever he put inside my mouth he would lose, and another time he loaned me a stamped envelope he got from commissary, or the state, and when I went to return it to him, choosing a moment while he had been showering, I approached him with my right hand tucked under

my left armpit, standard assassin's approach, as though concealing a weapon, and once I got close enough and he took notice, deadpan, I said: "*I got something for you*" (in the quiet tone that sounded like a quick heads-up death threat) and pulled the envelope out as if it were a knife, just to momentarily freak him out, which it did, but we both laughed. So, I wasn't dead set on his demise, but resigned to its inevitability once it became necessary. No one gets any mercy and no matter their value yesterday or today, tomorrow's alliances are always in flux. Today it was an envelope, tomorrow a shank, or maybe he'd get to me first.

Same place, same time, there was a middle-aged, blue-collar black guy, just about my size and build but about ten or fifteen years older, Galloway his name, Donald if I recall, a seasoned, habitual inmate. I don't remember what he was in for, probably not anything violent, maybe a burglary or possession of stolen property charge, something relatively harmless like that, a soft-spoken guy, but definitely one of the boys, an accepted and accredited, doo-rag-wearing, black-skinned brother on the tier. That was clear. He'd occasionally come into my cell while I was reading or exercising, "*Yo, Kap!*" using my current jailbird nickname, short for Kabakoff (who needs all those extra syllables?), and quietly ask if I would buy him toothpaste and soap from the commissary on the next order. How could I say 'no'? He had no money in his account, he had no one on the outside making any deposits for him, he

had no soap or toothpaste, so of course I did. It never felt threatening, I'm sure it wasn't, but a side effect of this arrangement, one I never sought, was that the other brothers knew I was doing it, and somehow it was appreciated, which made me an asset, not just another white-skinned liability or target, often outnumbered by as many as 17 to 3, and with that came a sense of a degree of immunity. One time, another middle-aged black guy, a darker-skinned dude with a thick mustache and a cigarette tucked behind each ear, also named Robert, similar to Galloway in that he wasn't necessarily a violent street criminal, probably not, probably just caught cutting corners in the projects by selling some weed or writing bad checks kind of thing, but definitely well-acclimated to the jailhouse environment, the two of us were called to "*roll it up*" by the COs, meaning pack up our gear and muster at the gate, as it was decided they were shifting the inmates around from one tier or floor of tiers to another as part of a regular routine. These routine moves were always stressors to me because once I had settled in and found my spot in the hierarchical pecking order in one location, I'd have to do it again in another setting, and who knows what that might mean or where I'd fit? It could always be a frying-pan-to-fire type of move, and for whatever it turned out to be, one had to be prepared. Anyway, the two of us are packed up and standing outside the tier in the common hallway joining the four tiers on the floor when he glances over at me, and sensing the stress I was trying to hide casually says: "*We be awright,*

Kap.” That reassurance meant something, that “we,” an act of kindness in a place where kindness has no place. If I was gonna get hassled by the brothers he’d let ’em know what was up by the way he treated me and in all likelihood that would be respected because as I said, he was definitely a respected member of the black inmate club. In fact, one time, I watched him playing spades with a few others, and someone, half-joking said he was acting like “a pussy” regarding the game, to which he suddenly stopped smiling and said: “*If I’m a pussy, come fuck me then*” and nobody moved. With that, the game continued. Anyway, in contrast, almost everybody up in Erie County had money on their accounts, at least enough for the basic necessities, and a lot more white guys, so there weren’t many issues like that, none for me in a realm of the few truly very desperate.

Much easier time upstate with fewer alliances

Adapting meant quite a bit of reading, novels, more than twenty of them during the term, from Truman Capote’s horrifying masterpiece “*In Cold Blood*” to Mario Puzo’s classic “*The Godfather*,” devouring them one after the other, from “*Lucifer’s Hammer*,” “*Flowers in the Attic*,” “*The Last Mafioso*” about Jimmy ‘the Weasel’ Fratianno, to Kosiński’s “*The Painted Bird*,” escaping into those different worlds between the turning pages. I was gonna be alright up here. In

fact, the argument could be made that I got a little too comfortable in those wide, open spaces.

The yard was another place of refuge, almost a sanctuary from boredom and confinement, about the size of a football field, maybe larger, but of course surrounded by tall concrete and brick walls crowned with watchtowers, barbed wire, and armed guards, not seating for fans and advertising boards, but it was wide open. Now, in late winter heading into early spring, we were free to roam it every day for a few hours in the afternoons. There, the brothers played basketball, the white guys played handball and volleyball, and cro-magnon Joey from the chow hall (who I'll get to in a bit) doing his fifty-yard sprints, one after the other after the next for hours on end. Everybody, regardless of race, used the weights, while everyone else just sat around, smoked cigarettes, and shot the breeze or jogged or strolled around the peripheral running track. I don't remember it being any more segregated than that. I don't remember a single fight or stabbing. We were all going home in less than a year, so there was little reason to fuck that up by catching another charge there, which I, keeping in characteristic recklessness, came close to doing one otherwise uneventful afternoon.

Seated with my back against the wall at the far side of the yard, furthest from the exterior brick and concrete prison wall

with the windows, gates, and entrance/exit ports, through the big glass reinforced windows, I caught a startling sight. A class of college girls was being given some sort of walking tour of the facility along the interior hallways while the roaming inmates were locked away safely outside, and I could see them filing past the windows. I didn't know if this was a class on criminology, social work, or maybe even a 'scared straight' exercise, and I didn't give it any thought. All I thought was *females! Visits!! Sex!!!* So, I leapt up and bolted full speed across the yard towards the windows which were elevated from the ground by about seven or eight feet, too high to get anyone's attention inside the building from the ground right below, so I took a running jump up and with both free hands grabbed onto one of the window ledges and pulled myself up into the visible range. Then, still holding on tight with my left, let go with my right hand to knock on the glass. Instead of responding to my amorous intentions with the hoped-for compassion and interest, the now startled females recoiled in visible shock bordering on horror as I tried to get my "visit me" message across by mouthing the words. While the nearest ones gawked frozen by the spectacle with a mixture of curiosity and alarm, I noticed the blood, then let go and dropped back down. My tightly clenched fist broke the glass and penetrated the window. Oh, well, not only did the entire yard witness my escapade, but even Joey stopped his routine to marvel at the sudden display of prison yard audacity. An inmate could get shot to death just for doing that,

again, an outcome never considered, lost in the thoughts of female companionship after so many months without any, and so far away from home, at just twenty-three.

After leaping back on the ground with my right hand bleeding, I was immediately surrounded by three or four fully alerted COs who grabbed me, took me inside, and locked me in a nearby holding cell to await a speedy trial by the kangaroo court of correction officers quickly convened to mete out punishment for such a gross institutional transgression.

Though it was obviously unintentional, the breaking of the window, which didn't matter too much by itself aside from the fact that I had damaged state property, my display of unhinged impetuosity made the staff look not-so-good, and not-so-in-charge. That was worse. They were supposed to be exercising tighter control than that, especially with outsiders visiting within the walls, so my outburst had to have quick, visible consequences.

A few hours after being led out of the yard, maybe even during the same shift I was brought to the office of one of the higher ups and sentenced to three days lock-in in my cell and made to pay for the window out of my commissary account. Okay. No big deal. At least they weren't taking my good time, which aside from the prospect of visiting females, was all I really cared about, going home, and going home as soon as possible and in one physical piece, the same way I came in.

Now, the thing about being locked in a small cell is that after only a few hours of lying on one's rack (see Volume I), pacing back and forth, stretching, doing pushups, running in place, squats, and situps, you get bored and antsy. Even lying down becomes uncomfortable. Aches and pains emerge, and there is little to no relief. You can get back up, pace some more, or even sit, but eventually, you lie back down, and the aches return. All that was bad enough, but by day three, the drama went from bad to worse. There's little I try to avoid more than having to be brave. I'd really rather not be put to the test or task, but sometimes the opportunity just lands in your lap, and there you have to deal with it. One such opportunity fell into my lap the morning I was released from the three-day term.

There was a 'bug' on my tier—a wild-haired, athletically built, darker-skinned black guy in his thirties. They called him that because he was noticeably 'bugged out', as in crazy, as in cursing to himself alone and aloud, unwashed, barefooted with open body sores, and dangerous. Normally, he didn't bother anyone, kept to himself and his private delusions, so no one complained about his presence or bothered him either. He had nothing anyone wanted or needed.

At some point, due to his lack of hygiene practices, the tier would have acted as one to remove him, but we weren't there quite yet. Downstate, at the county, it would have happened right away, but as I said, things were looser here up to a point.

It's still a cage of wild animals of which he was surely, obviously one of the more 'colorful'.

Up until now, there were no issues between us. He ignored everybody, so it was easy to just let him be, until it wasn't. On the last night of the term, the rest of my no-goodnik cohorts were busy watching the basketball playoffs on the tube at the far end of the tier where the TV was mounted just outside the bars, but reachable to change the channel and adjust the volume, same as in Nassau County. Unlike the county, there was also a free-standing house AM/FM radio about the size of a four-slice toaster playing on the table right in front of my cell, so for me, the game was a chance to finally change the station from the nonstop annoying dance music favored by the dark-skinned inmates for a taste of good ol' fashioned, white-boy rock'n roll, which upon request someone switched for me enabling me to enjoy another modest escape. I'll take a little Toto's "*Africa*" over "*Planet Rock*" by Afrika Bambaataa if for nothing more than variety, and it was appreciated, a chance to get in my own groove. I was enjoying the music when *the bug* came by and suddenly switched it back to the dance crap, who knew he even heard music? So, I immediately started barking and in no uncertain terms demanded he dial it back, cueing him to immediately pick up the radio and hurl it at me full force causing it to smash against the bars and explode, literally, into smoky smithereens, and now there was no radio. Bad.

Since the lock-down was scheduled to end the next morning, that meant I would have to deal with him face to face, no iron separation bars between us to shield me from the next explosion. This was not going to be pleasant or fun, but it was unavoidable and going to happen. As soon as morning came and the gates cracked, sneakers tied, I was already wrapped up, my fists covered in protective rags made from sheets and underwear with my long hair tucked beneath another tight rag on my head. Thus dressed for battle, adrenaline pumping, I grabbed all the courage I could muster and a full packet of Top state tobacco and rolling papers I had on hand in my cell for tobacco-less emergencies and with them headed towards his cell, intending them as a peace offering while reporting for battle stations. It was going to be one or the other.

By the grace of Shiva, as soon as he saw me at his cell gate looking in at him, he seemed to understand, a shared moment of two-way deadpan expression, my message was carrot and stick. He might not even have remembered me or the event the night before. Who knew? Luckily, he sort of smiled and took the carrot. I never needed the stick, and that was the end of it. But the short walk that morning registers as one of my more dramatic encounters requiring as much intestinal fortitude as I was able to summon. Others might have called it in and *'locked it up'*, meaning alerted the COs and moved off the tier. That happens all the time too, but not with me. A scrap with him would very likely be bloody and who knows what kind of

bacteria might have entered my system as a result of a scratch or a bite, but I wasn't going anywhere that morning except to see him and close that account, hoping for the best while prepared for the worst. *'Gadzooks! Who needs to summon bravery under conditions like that? Forget it. Save it for Iwo Jima'*, it seems to me. *'Don't waste it in the jailhouse.'*

Back on set

If it wasn't working as background on popular prime-time series like *Oz* or *Law and Order*, or a feature film, or earning my stripes with a stint on a public access television program no one watches, it was auditioning for principal work. That was a whole 'nother level of hustle. Bear in mind a fundamental and basic truism like 'night following day', as we ascend the peak it steepens and narrows. Generally speaking, the auditions worth attending aren't open to the public, not even open to simply guild members, they are available by invitation only. The way to get an invitation is through agent submission. The way to get an agent submission is by having an agent who submits you. The way to have an agent is by not needing one. Joseph Heller couldn't have described that paradox any simpler. Unless you're like twelve years old, a talent they 'discover' and nurture for the long haul, they want earners, not possible up-and-comers. Whatever type you are, they already have a file cabinet drawer full, A-list and B-list.

So, where does that leave the overwhelming majority of actors, union or not, that do not have agents? It leaves us in a bind, the proverbial rock and hard place. By that, in this case, it means first the rock: one must acquire the intelligence, i.e., knowledge of what auditions are being held, for what roles? Where? By who and when? How would one even know about them? You won't find them listed in classifieds, no, not *Newsday* and not even the *New York Times*, not *Variety* or the *Hollywood Reporter* either. That information is carefully guarded in order to prevent hustlers like me from 'crashing' the auditions, showing up without an invite and trying to finesse their way into the room where the cameraman and casting directors are seated with the notepads. All that by itself is a daunting project, and that's before even booking the gig, an unlikely project from the start just by looking at the numbers and the odds, dozens, or hundreds of actors competing for only a handful of jobs. But some of us, the diehards, the truly committed and audacious, some may say *delusional*, we go for it anyway. How? One way was to get a hold of the '*Breakdowns*', a list of projects being cast, by who and for which roles, the details broken down daily. So we knew what, who and where to try to crash by simply showing up, signing in and taking a seat in the waiting room in the hopes that the casting assistant would make a mistake, think you were on the invited list, and bring you in. It's happened. Of course though, even in the event of that long shot panning out, it's still a long way from a booking, but it is a step in that

direction. This daily listing comes in the form of a shared memo between casting directors working for production companies and the agencies that hand select their clients, the actors, or talent and whose headshots and resume get sent out, usually by fax, or messenger in response. The Breakdowns are delivered on a subscription fee basis and only to those recognized industry professionals who use them, and they are protected by confidentiality agreements, top secret! But as with almost everything else, there's a weak link in the chain, someone is corrupted, someone whose hands they pass through makes copies of them and sells them to someone who sells them to actors like me who want to buy them. However they are acquired, once out, word spreads to that actor's supporting crew, like with the waivers, the ever-resourceful, smooth operator Daniel Reton might call me and say: "*Rob, Caroline Sinclair is casting a new feature film starring Adam Sandler, they're looking for New York mobster types, you'd be perfect. 2PM at her office this Thursday*" and armed with that information, I'd dress the part, summon up my chutzpah and just show up hoping for the best.

Of course, after signing in, while seated among the other actors, the ones who actually had appointments, in the waiting room or hallway just outside the studio, the real tension and the real acting job starts. You have to act like you're supposed to be there, like everything is fine, just the way it should be. If you actually get as far as in the room, a rarity, you're usually

busted once the assistant spots your name and it doesn't match her list, but not always. You have to play the character you are auditioning for. Usually, while seated in the waiting room waiting to be called, the 'sides' (the selected section of scripted scene) will be available based on the specific role, but it's basically a 'cold read', which you have to have the talent to bring off convincingly, at least 'type-wise', but they usually know that as soon as you walk in the door and open your mouth, when there's very little that can be done to affect that either way. There may be more than one role casted during that session, and you learn the lines according to the script for the character you are aiming for to the best of your ability before going in. If the material is good, readable, believable and a good fit for your skills, it's not as hard as it may sound, it's a conversation, and of course, you're allowed to bring the sides in with you that intimate, professional space, no one really expects you to be 'off book' (lines memorized) after just a few minutes with the copy, you just do it as best as you can. Again, at that point it's really just about establishing the type, i.e., how you might fit it. The performance comes after that, it can be worked on, type, outside extraordinary talent, usually can not, and it's not merely physical, it's 'holistic' when done right.

Once I got that far, in the room past the assistant, I'd always have a blast, despite, or maybe because of the adrenaline blast coming at me from so many different directions. Of course,

I'm an actor! I'm acting like I belong here! See? How am I doing? I had to get credit just for that, and the New York chutzpah. While I maybe did get that half-hearted credit, and made an impression, maybe a good one, maybe a not-so-good one, I never booked any gigs that way. The casting directors and talent agencies work in a tight loop, a symbiosis, and going outside that loop is not in the business model, but things happen anyway. That's the rock, the hard place is foregoing all that and going nowhere as a result, staying home, so forget that. That's not show biz, that's *Palukaville*.

Of course, many of the other casting calls are 'open'. Their schedules are announced on industry, subscription-based publications like *Backstage* or *Actors Access*. Production companies not wanting or needing to get involved with all the procedural industry formalities, are willing to discover new talent on their own, but they are usually not for the better (higher paying, wider distribution) gigs. Regardless, some of them are quite memorable and often quite worthy creatively and professionally. This one comes to mind.

The Stickup Kids (2008)

Even when you self-submit, you still need an invitation; otherwise, they'd be flooded with applicants out the door, down the hall, out of the building, and around the block for days on end. Seriously, I've seen it. Everybody, it seemed,

wanted to get on camera and play a role, but of course, not everybody has what they need to offer for any given project. Thus, the casting process, looking for that needle in the haystack, or diamond in the rough. The role called for the main evil-doer's (a ruthless property-owner, a landlord with underworld connections) henchman, his lieutenant, and second in command of his gangster operation, and I got an invite. Once I got there, seated in the hallway outside the studio among the other score or more of hopefuls, all middle-aged white guys as specified in the breakdowns, I saw that the entire production company was black folk, African Americans, which for me was always a good sign. Why? I'm not so sure; let's call it vibes, probably due to a multitude of factors, not least of which being how I was raised. That is, to feel comfortable around African American people, and it is naturally reflected back, but for whatever reason, including the nature of the project, the energy was good.

Once my name was called and I entered the 16th floor room in the heart of the city's film center, a much larger space than usual, generally used for acting classes and workshops by another outfit I'll get to called Actors Connection, about three times the size, I was directed to my 'mark', a spot on the floor usually indicated by a small piece of blue tape where the camera is already focused. Facing me, by about fifteen to twenty feet ahead was a long, narrow table where at least seven or eight production team members in their twenties and

thirties, artsy types, male and female, all sat silently focused on me. Unusual, but not unheard of, it was more a committee than the usual pared-down casting director and camera-operator, maybe the project-director or an assistant. Once I ‘slated’ for them, I began half-reading, already half off-book, the lines which were more a monologue than dialogue. They might say: “*Read to the camera*” or “*read to me,*” or indicate an “eye-line” to focus on, or they may say nothing and leave it to you. Anyway, dialogues are usually much easier because the cues are built in, he says, then you say, a conversation type of thing which should basically flow in some comprehensible manner that helps the memory. There is no direction in the waiting room; they want to see what you bring naturally to the role, without interference, and what I brought to the character and scene, without direction, was not exactly the tone they wanted, but they saw the ‘type’ they needed, the raw material, so they gave me direction which we call adjustments. The scene was between the main boss and his top lieutenant. My impression just from the script section alone was that the underling was deferential to the boss, almost fearful of him, but that's not the tone they had in mind. “*Cut!*” The director interrupted me after only a few lines to clarify it for me: “*He’s not afraid of the boss, it’s a shark circling a shark, a cutthroat operation and if the boss shark doesn’t feed the hungry sharks following him well enough, they will eat him, and everyone knows it,*” or something to that effect. Sometimes they even make adjustments just to see if

and how well you can take direction. Either way I heard him loud and clear. “*Now, step out, please, we'll call you back in!*” After the brief break, ten or fifteen minutes while they saw the next one or two candidates, it was my turn again, and I got it right away, an easy transition to make. My adrenaline was on extra-positive high because I know I'm getting close, I can feel it, and I really want it. I know I can deliver, and it's a pro, principal gig. It would be my first submitted, invited, auditioned-for speaking role in a SAG feature film, totally legit, one-hundred percent kosher, and a very big deal, so the pressure is on. Again, the peak narrows as it ascends. Anyway, back inside, on my mark, slated, and called to “*Action!*” I delivered, batted it right out of the park. First swing. A home run. After the first half-page of lines, only a paragraph or two of dialogue, again the director, Hawthorne James, calls out “Cut! Welcome to The System Within, we'll be sending you the sides and a shooting schedule shortly. Please stand by.” Now the silent committee is all smiles and congratulations. BULL's EYE!!! Another milestone, almost as big as my third SAG waiver! Who knows, Maybe bigger. But this next milestone wouldn't have been reached until after the preceding one; it was SAG only for the principles. That meant I was actually becoming what I set out for. It's 2008 when, after over a decade of working at it, from never on any set to a non-union extra on set regularly, then to union extra, now to principal, bottom up, and now a for-real fully fledged professional actor. An earlier principal gig back in 2002 was a

‘bump’, an upgrade on set, and a very big deal in its own right, which I’ll get to, but it was pretty much a product of right time, right place, right connections, but this was none of that; this gig was from the bottom rung up. Unbelievable. I was a high school dropout and juvenile delinquent, a therapeutic community and boot-camp washout, a jailbird, then a trucker, a trouble-maker, an unloved child kicked out of his own home, a drunk, and a waste-of-life pothead, no more. This was an evolutionary moment, from wishful fantasy to dramatic real-life fulfillment. *Welcome* indeed.

Less than a week later, once the full script and my call sheet came in the mail, including the rehearsal and shooting schedule (the contract would be signed later on set), I saw that I wasn’t cast in the role I auditioned for, but another. It happens from time to time; it’s part of the creative process. Instead of the boss’s top underling, I was now *Wallace*, the prison psychologist conducting a therapy session. Surprise, surprise! But the lines were good, and the scene itself terrific, well-written and full of emotional drama. In fact, the lead actor who appears in the scene, a character in a wheelchair, delivers the film’s (befuddled) message, a commonly entertained conspiracy theory amounting to a paranoid delusion, just as the production company’s DBA suggests, but who cared? Not me. It’s a film, not a public policy platform, and most meaningfully a chance to actually act, to show the world what I could do besides what I’d already done.

Something else useful, productive, creative, and inarguably worthwhile. And man, oh man, did we rehearse. With the director on location, a Harlem elementary school, and on our own in my humble, Lincoln Square-tony pied-à-terre. Seven or eight of us, the inmates in the session and me, going over the lines, again and again until we were not only off-book, but the roles, timing, and flow fully ingested. Again, my terms in the can came in handy. I got it. The pressures, the resentments, the confinement, the threats and fear, the occasional explosive release, I knew where we were, we all did. And, naturally, at the end, me, Wallace, the white guy takes all the blame, as if the inmates, all black and Latino, in keeping with the confines of the conspiracy, had no will of their own, made no choices as people, discreet human beings that brought them there, they were not individuals, they were powerless marionettes on a string pulled by the all-powerful, sinister system within, strictly members of an exploited community not to be held accountable for their violence, nihilism, and cruelty. Okay. Fine. Whatever. So what? It's their project, not mine. They're entitled to have their say and express themselves, right? It's the arts and in this venue, I'm only the help, and glad to be part of it, and once again, despite the *mishigos*, it's 'A-game' all the way time again. My favorite time.

Came '*the day*,' the industry term for the coming shoot day, there was another surprise. The lead actor, the character in the wheelchair, was replaced by another actor. It was only a

surprise because I'd never seen it before, and he, and his monologue at the end of our scene was central. The team of writers, producers, and the director must have worked it out last minute. The rehearsal before, when the original cast actor, a lead, finally joined us, he could not deliver. No matter how much time Hawthorne put into explaining it to him, no matter the effort, and to me what he was saying was quite clear, certainly clear enough, the guy just couldn't hear it, so for whatever reason or reasons, just couldn't deliver. His motivation was off. It was as if he just didn't get it. Crazy. But the new guy? *Slam!* Again, right out of the park on the first swing. Hallelujah, a scene can only be as good as the weakest performance. Everyone else can be perfect, but one sour note can kill it. The scene won't work right. Whatever doesn't work, especially with regards to the acting performances brings it down, a direction none of us wants it to go, so it's 'A-game' for all of us, across the board, and the new guy definitely brought his despite the demented paranoia of the message. He sold it. He was so convincing, he almost had me believing it, and a great performance has the effect of lifting up everybody else's. I don't know quite how that works, but it invariably does. I've been on both sides. So we all 'killed it.' When the film was released, and I saw it, to put it kindly and in print, all I will say and with all due modesty is that our scene in the prison therapy session was the only one worth watching. The rest is pure scatterbrained baloney as if the film is trying to figure out what it wants to be, a drama? A

comedy? An action thriller? Social commentary? All four? Good luck with that, because outside the theater of the absurd, it barely made the grade on any of them. For *The Stickup Kids* story-tellers, the young armed robbers are actually the heroes of the film. Why? Because their crime is not really a crime, ignore the victims, their crime is justified pushback against the so-called 'system within' holding them down. Capish? The conceit of the producers was obvious in their refusal to acknowledge the difficulty of achieving success at any one of those cinematic genres. It's always quite a challenge even with the best assets in play, but succeeding at all of them? Simultaneously? Did they also delude themselves into believing that they really had that much talent and without a track record to prove it? Impressive. Though it might happen, a great success, it's a long, long, long shot, and even the best talent in the business fail much more often than they succeed. I'll leave it at that. They did step up and gave it a shot, so earned credit is awarded there, no small task just that. And on the plus side for this actor, in addition to all that's been already laid out, with Wallace's fifteen-seconds of fame, I began to build my 'reel.'

Back in Erie County with "Spider", "Bear" and "Red" a decade before

Naturally, as mentioned, we play a lot of cards in jail, mainly an abbreviated version of *Bridge* called *Spades*. The game is

played with partners of two facing off against another pair. The cards are dealt, and the players evaluate their chances of winning the hands by counting their ‘trump cards’, their high cards in every suit, and among them all the spades. Then the team tries to draw out the trump cards by feeding the ‘pot’ with what they hope will work at having the partner throw a higher card or spade to take the hand. Before the play, the teams bet by estimating the number of hands they are likely to win. If they succeed, they score; if not, they are “set” back and lose points. It's simple and fun. Or should be. And the stakes are usually made in push-ups; the losers do them, and occasionally cigarettes, a standard jailhouse currency.

More about each tier having its own ‘alpha male’ who arises from the evolutionary pile of the misbegotten to reign supreme amongst the misfits. He uses the phone when he wants. If you are on it and he approaches, you wrap up the conversation and just get off. We watch the television channel and programs he chooses; if there's extra food, say, desserts to be given out? Guess who gets them. Privileges like that. This title is often achieved by obvious, natural selection, the biggest, meanest, and strongest who opts for the title, like Azim held for a short reign. Others, maybe just as or even more qualified, like Big Joe, couldn't be bothered, so it falls to the one to whom it does. It's taken, not given. I've only once seen a discrepancy, that tale to come. In state and federal prisons, it's probably a much more complicated and nuanced

designation, the ‘shot caller’, involving the ‘politics’ engaged in by a number of disparate communities, usually determined primarily and within race-based gangs, but here in the Erie County lockup, it was simpler. In this case, once the prior big dawg had left the tier, the spot was quickly filled by a young, dark-skinned brother known simply as *Bear*. The name fit; he kind of looked like a brown bear, but as well as looking the part, menacing, he was quiet, a lower key alpha dog which made his presumptive authority tolerable. Bear didn't need to flash his authority; it was basically a given. Kind of like: “*Okay. You're the big dawg today. Fine. Now let's play some Spades.*” The jailhouse tier, like nature itself, seems to abhor a vacuum at the top of the Lord of the Flies hierarchy. When his predecessor was called off the tier, the new alpha-male went into his vacated cell and took the Playboy centerfolds, the power totems, off the painted metal wall and mounted them on his. Like Ralph's conch, that made it official.

Bear had two lieutenants, both young guys like him, and me, early to mid-twenties, both about his size, both well adapted to living life in cages among predators and prey. “Red” was a light-skinned brother (thus the nickname), also quiet, not especially mean, but undoubtedly capable should the need arise; it was a given, established in part by the ever-present cigarette behind each ear, and fading jailhouse tattoos up and down his chest and arms. They told you he'd been around, and was again around, meaning he had successfully adapted,

meaning the necessary mojo was ready and available. And coming in at third place was “Spider”, a slightly darker-skinned young man who earned his nickname from his wiry build and seeming limitless gymnastic skills. One time, showing off, facing me from about only about four or five feet away, he executed a perfect backflip from a standing position, hurled himself backwards a full 360 and landed back on his feet facing me again, relaxed and smiling. That was impressive. You don’t want to have to fight a dude that can do that, at least not bare-handed. Occasionally, me and my usual card partner (more about him to follow), would play against two of them. It was usually standard play, without any added drama, racial or otherwise, just cards. Someone would end up doing pushups while the others watched and gloated, “*kiss the floor!*” That’s it. Life on the tier. Until, of course, the time it wasn’t.

My card partner, a white, Italian-American guy from Yonkers, also a quiet, sturdily-built bloke in the same age range, also regimented into the jailhouse environment (very few, if any of my neighbors were incarcerated for their first time), probably another misbegotten ‘career criminal’ of one stripe or another, was about as good a Spades player as one could need. It’s more a mechanical exercise than a strategic thinking one, so you don’t have to be brilliant to be effective. You just need to be able to recognize symbols (suits) and keep count, and not do anything stupid. Aside from the game, I don’t think we had

very much to say to one another; even his name and charges were lost in the cluttered details of memory, and I probably interacted with Spider and Red a lot more than I did with him day to day, but we were both white, and he was my card-partner; that formed a bond that other considerations couldn't break. One lazy afternoon, I happened to notice the four of them, my card partner and the three 'shot-callers,' huddled together, speaking quietly at the far corner of the tier. The composition and positioning of the gathering by itself was ominous, and the soon-discovered content of the discussion made it all the more so. Quickly, the word through the grapevine came to me that they were confronting him over his use of the much-dreaded, supremely powerful and profoundly exaggerated word '*nigger*.' Once I received that fun fact detail, my move was clear, laid out for me, and dreadful. I had to go down there. I didn't have to join the discussion; I wasn't invited, but I did have to be on hand, no invitation required. It looked like they were fixin' to clobber him, three on one, so my presence was essentially, and undeniably mandatory. If anything 'jumped off' as it looked like it was about to, it had to be three on two, not three on one, that's an unwritten, but firmly established jailhouse rule. If a member of your race, card-partner or total stranger, is attacked by any number above one, of another race, you have to jump in and support him, even if you hate his guts and are pals with the other race guys. That's just how it is, jailhouse 'politics'. If you don't? You're marked, and will be punished for breaking that cardinal rule,

and it will be a visible and meaningful punishment; you may even lose your life. It happens. So with a lot of pulsing adrenaline and no small degree of trepidation and dread, but without much choice or deliberation, like to the “bug’s” cell that morning a few weeks back, I put on my sneakers and meandered down there.

This was a delicate and urgent diplomatic mission. While I couldn’t let my card partner go it alone, I didn’t want to get my head busted either, so again, the rock and that ever-present hard place. After quickly evaluating the totality of the equation, I got Buddhist and chose the ‘middle path’ by nonchalantly as possible headed down the otherwise vacant end of the tier but stopped in the opposite corner from where the four of them stood, not very close, but not far. While standing there, I made myself busy, picking up the phone and fake dialing a number, then appearing as if searching for something or otherwise engaged in some sort of activity that would provide some type of plausible cover for my location, aside from the obvious. I didn't say anything or get involved, but everyone saw and everyone knew why I was really there. If they went at him, I’d have no choice but to jump in. That meant they had to beat on me too. No matter the outcomes, it was going to be bad, at least for me. As I stood there, maybe inspecting the showerhead or reading some mail, I don’t remember, but I do vividly recall my knees literally felt like they’d turned to jelly, so juiced up with flight or fight it was

all I could do just to remain standing upright, having lost all power of control over my limbs, the adrenaline that great, standing there by doing all I could to maintain balance on my two feet, totally numb from the waist down. Now, of course, the three black musketeers saw me, and they knew why I was down there, and to this day, I believe that's why they never went ahead and started to throw punches. They didn't want to bang on me. So, after a few more moments, the four of them broke their lock on each other and went back to life in a cage as usual, more peaceful than not, but only slightly, always perched on that precarious edge. And so, I was spared. But that exercise in courage, if that's what you want to call it, stands out as possibly the bravest I ever was in life, facing a near-certain beatdown, possibly even the endless abyss, but not willing to break the jailhouse code to let my fellow white-skinned Spades partner go it alone. I tell these tales to provide context for another one, the coda of my run in the Erie County Penitentiary, just days before my departure and release when my courage faltered, but I'll get to that in due course. Stay tuned.

“Be what you is!”

On *Oz*, one of the first scenes I remember shooting was this remarkable display of ‘rap’. The scene is set in the prison chow hall where the entire company of extras as inmates was

present, imagine about fifty or sixty of us, seated at those long, fixed, institutional tables with trays of cold food in front of us, tapping out rhythmically to the chants of the inmate rapping guy who stood at the far end of the camera, facing it and us. Except for Sugar Hill's 1979 hit *Rapper's Delight*, I don't recall ever hearing any other music in that style before then. I was still into the same progressive, standard, and psychedelic rock I was into as a child of the 60s, which for me was the golden age of modern pop music: The Doors, the Stones, the Beatles, Hendrix, ELP, Yes, Neil Young, and the Grateful Dead genres, so when I heard this guy up there in front of the whole planet, bopping and rhyming while blasting out his story, a story all I can remember about is him taking someone's cigarettes in jail, it was an impressive standout. I don't remember if I ever even knew the chunky, performing dark-skinned cat's name, if he was a star or an unknown, but he did it in two takes, an extended rap, maybe three or four minutes of non-stop, bop and thrust, and his delivery was flawless both times. Not a single stutter, missed beat, or error, as if he poured his entire waiting being into what he had to say in that moment, and it captivated and riveted the audience, everyone, cast, and crew, including me. At the end of which, for some reason, a riot broke out in the form of a scripted food-fight which was about as much fun as it sounds, all against all. But, while having all that fun throwing potato salad across the table into the faces of whoever was in reach, the scene brought back for me images and memories of the

chow hall up in Erie County, a much less festive atmosphere which taken together and as a whole, both experiences produced the type of surreality my life was growing accustomed to.

If you recall, back in *Volume I*, I talked about sharing a cell with guy during my first thirty-day stretch as a sixteen-year-old, a local black dude by the name of Hank or Henry, a trim, dark-skinned brother charged with burglary or possession of stolen property, something along those lines, a career criminal, and a reasonably articulate, unapologetic, generally non-violent chap, but always capable and always ready. They don't normally mix races in the same cell, but at this stage, on 'B-floor,' when first entering the facility before being assigned more permanent housing, and due to overcrowding, they did. Anyhow, we shared cigarettes and small talk. Since he was from a neighboring town we knew some of the same people, so the companionship, even in those tight quarters, was reasonably comfortable for a few short days. And now up in Buffalo, six or seven years later, here he was again, only this time, he was the alpha male over what seemed like all the black inmates doing their stretches in Erie County, every tier, the entire imported block of probably three hundred or more. While there, Hank and I may have crossed paths once or twice while heading back from or to the yard, shared a quick nod of recognition ('*you again?*'), but that type of reunion was a common enough occurrence not worth any

sort of recognition, barely even worth acknowledging. After all, it's the perennial jailhouse crowd, not the Olympic try-outs or the opening night of a film festival. We're all stuck in this life— inmates, convicts, the routinely incarcerated crowd—so it's not worth celebrating by anyone's measure, except perhaps for the fully institutionalized, for whom it's more like a class reunion. I did take note of the position he now held, which was somewhat impressive in itself. There are a lot of contenders, even some pretenders, but he was for sure, the moment's uncrowned alpha beast of the entire black community, and any doubt would be quickly handled.

Back on my tier, after the reign of Bear, Spider, and Red, perhaps they were released or moved to another tier, a new *big dawg* took their place on our tier, another local black guy from Nassau County simply called by his first name, Glen, and Glen was a prick, a bully, and this was his moment to flex. Up until now, he never bothered me, so I didn't care, but he did bother Henry when the two crossed paths like in the chow hall or yard. Just a few days before the event I'm about to describe, Glen already had taken the Playboy pictures, he got into a brawl with another brother on our tier, a skinny black dude who everyone including himself called '*Prince*.' Being a jailbird is no barrier against the appeal and perils of narcissistic delusion, at all, e.g., descendants of generations of beaten down slaves magically transformed into high and mighty, all-powerful, royalty (see "Queen" Latifa, Nat "King"

Cole, “Duke” Ellington, “Count” Basie, “Pharaoh” Sanders, et al.), sometimes it can even add to the mythic legend one ascribes himself. The skinny dude did actually look like the rock star, *Prince*, and he generally had that artist’s look to him, the processed hair and trim physique, not a hitter, more like a one-hundred-and-forty-pound performer, a singer without a mic, not a killer with a shank. Anyway, I have no idea what triggered it, but a fight broke out between the two and Prince was quickly overwhelmed by the much larger Glen, who had him pinned to the asphalt and tile floor before pounding his face with repeated blows of his fists. Prince had long since lost the fight before it ended, and you could see both the fear and the surrender in his eyes, blood coming from his mouth, but Glen, enjoying his sense of unbridled power, pressed on, pounding him almost unconscious. Eventually, he stopped, but not until we all witnessed just the kind of merciless brute he was. As an aside, when I fight? Tender-hearted and gentle-spirited as I am, once I see ‘surrender’ in my opponent’s face and fear in his eyes, I usually wrap it up, fight over, point made. So, the difference between the two styles is stark to me.

Like in the county downstate, each floor was divided into four tiers, with every tier housing twenty inmates, one per cell. When heading down to the chow hall, the floors are released one by one, so eighty inmates at a time arrive in the hall until all floors of imported inmates are accounted for, three times a

day. Eighty mostly hard-looking guys come “rolling in” at once, which is quite a spectacle to get used to — the grand entrance, both intimidating and unforgettable, like a gallery of criminal and mercenaries archetypes, the muscular 1% bikers, the heavily tattooed, the slick gangster types in their too white sneakers and too pressed jailhouse uniforms, the white-hating newly religious black Muslims, the tightly clicked-up Latino gang members, assorted prison yard veterans of scarred and wiry, all trying their hardest to look the meanest and most confrontational of all, a “*Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the baddest motherfucker of all?*” type of trip. There’d be no anodyne food fights here with this crowd. Entering the scene just behind the forward vanguard of criminal types were the less adapted, the passive or timid or those, like me, who couldn't be bothered and just wanted to get home, trying to get by each day in one piece without challenging anyone for the title of number one roughneck and alpha dog, and behind them, the way too soft for this kind of life, and they knew it. It was clear. You could see the way they walked, treading lightly, darting eyes, and the veneer of false calm on their faces, the frozen half-smile, covering up the constant, corrosive fear. I'd been there too. Anyway, Forget that. No pantomimes of violence in this here neck of the woods either, only the real things: blood and broken bones, emergency rooms, courtrooms and mortuaries.

If your floor was already seated before the next was released, you got a front-row seat watching the parade of felons come rolling in, one snarling cadre after another. Naturally, since there's no "*Holy shit! Get me out of here!*" option, you have to just adapt, feigning nonchalance to the ordinary life among a dudgeon of condemned goons, of which, though you may not feel the part, objectively speaking, you are.

Though the competition for *meanest, baddest-looking motherfucker of all* is relentless, part of the basic institutional fabric, a hierarchy, once established, is apt to be maintained, at least for the near term. Though not necessarily an alpha dog in the chow hall, or even the yard, one of the condemned goons worth describing was an Italian-American (probably Sicilian, my sense), that Joey doing sprints in the yard. He worked full-time in the chow hall, where he was all about that place, and did everything from serving food to mopping floors, always wearing that inexplicable grin, looking as much like a Neanderthal as a Homo sapien, with short legs and long arms beneath oversized broad shoulders, and hovering over a massive back were his coal-black eyes. Always smiling beneath that protruding brow, like he was having the time of his life up there and just couldn't get enough of the good ol' jailhouse cooking. I mention him as an example of the regular rogues' gallery in daily attendance at the Erie County Penitentiary chow hall because emblematic of the community, I could see that just inside, or behind that smile was pure

savagery, homicidal inclinations, probably butchery, and his presence alone, enforced by that ever-present smile, was lurking a menacing predator, like that guy in the cage with me back in Ocean County.

Trying to stay cool, I'm thinking: *no one's targeting me so there's no need to react, just sit here, keep your head down, eat the food and pray to get through another day in one piece with whatever shreds of dignity are still intact.* On this particular day, as we rolled in, after Hank and his tier were already seated, though I didn't hear what ignited the explosion, words were exchanged between Glen, the prick, and Hank, the big dawg, which prompted the latter to suddenly break ranks and stand up. The chow-hall rule was to remain seated until the order given to stand up and exit, again, floor by floor. So now everyone, already seated or still standing on the chow line, focused on the pair, when Hank faced Glen who had not yet sat. Both now standing, less than three feet from each other from just across the narrow table, and with a booming baritone, like an impassioned preacher letting loose a measured apocalyptic fire aimed at his would-be challenger, pointed to his chest and proclaimed for all to hear four simple syllables that made clear his entire message: "*Be what you is!*" Commanded Hank. That's all. That was it. As succinct and compelling as just that. *Be what you is, you ain't no alpha dog, I'm the only alpha dog here, and if you want to try me, you want to test your fate? Here we*

are, right now. Let's see. Let everyone see. Now! Let's go, punk-ass bitch! Put up or shut up. To which, after a very brief pause, as if he was searching but not finding a suitable response, Glen, the prick, quietly took his seat and went to work on his meal, now restored to his proper station. Confrontation over. Verdict in. Point made.

Yet, it wasn't all a power parade of fear and intimidation all the time down there. In fact, at one point, the whole hall exploded in what might pass for lighthearted laughter, a macabre celebration of howling hyenas. There was one inmate, some sort of darker-skinned type, not quite black, definitely not white, not even Latino but definitely very thin and very effeminate, a big-eyed, little guy who had no apparent wish to be anything other than how he appeared, perhaps a male sex slave looking for a 'prison daddy' for protection and comfort. When this jailhouse celebrity entered the stage, entering the chow hall usually a few steps behind the rest, on his own, the other inmates wanted no association so they gave him a wide berth, but the entire house (minus the COs) erupted with hoots and hollers, jeers, catcalls, and laughter to the extent you would have thought the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders suddenly showed up topless and ready to serve the food. It was crazy, loud, and I must admit, fun. The shy little guy ate it up. No one seemed like they were going to hurt him; it wasn't hostile, but it wasn't subtle either. They just played their role in his act. Some have said: *a blow*

job's a blow job. Who cares if the mouth is female or male? Some even say the same thing about *ass*. My answer is the same to both: *I do*. But no one was asking me and I wasn't making any inquiries. The closest I ever came to that dynamic was the one time headed up on the stairwell and he was coming from the other way headed down, alone, and we crossed paths. In that instant of eye contact, it seemed like how if doing a long stretch, a decade or more, that might seem like a reasonable impulse, and even then it'd be all about domination anyway. Strange to see and strange to say, but what I saw in his eyes was a woman, a female inhabiting a male body. Strange but true, and to this delusion I duly confess.

While on the subject of confessions, there's another I have to make — a confession of passivity bordering on cowardice. There was a white dude on the tier, a 'white-trash' trailer park and biker club reject in his thirties, complete with broken and missing front teeth, a hand-drawn tattoo covering his entire back of a middle finger flipping the world the bird, and his always-worn cotton neckerchief covering his half-bald head; apparently, his male vanity extended to the one place it had exactly zero relevance, except of course to him. Dave, his name, an inveterate jailbird, and Dave didn't like me. Again, there's often no tangible reason for this sort of reaction. Like I've stated before, it's purely visceral. On the other hand, aside from his hostility, he caused no reaction in me, none

whatever. Almost a blank, a virtual nonentity. Oddly enough, out in the yard, though, while on the volleyball court, we were fine. I played the ‘bucket man’, the center spot, stopping then feeding the ball to the taller guys like him in the front who would slam it down hard on the other side of the net. But back on the tier, he provoked me.

Another young guy, a Latino named Eddie, a smaller chap and another inveterate jailbird, he and I had our own little coffee club, meaning we’d store all the extra coffee served in the mornings in empty half-pint milk cartons. Then later in the afternoon, heat it up by burning a spire of rolled-up toilet paper under the suspended cartons as discreetly as possible in the back of the cell. To suspend the cartons, we’d tear along the edge of a bedsheet to create a ribbon, tie the ends through two punctures made with a pencil or pen on the top of the cartons, and hold it by hand above the flame. One guy would do the cooking, while the other kept lookout for COs, as this was breaking prison rules, the flame. After the coffee was heated up, we’d sit together and have a two-man coffee hour complete with cigarettes, maybe a game of chess, and definitely some amusing, caffeine-fueled chit-chat about ‘the streets’, the females, and serving time. These are the two primary relationships that provide the context for what I’m about to confess to and report.

It was the day that, coming out of the shower with my towel draped over my shoulders, Dave came over and grabbed each end of the towel and began half-jokingly, half-not, to strangle me with it. *Ha! Ha! Hysterical, right?* I'm not sure why; he wasn't really all that intimidating, probably only a few inches taller and a few scrawny pounds heavier, just your typical jailhouse scum type of dude, but I played along with the half-joking part until, while still upright, I almost lost consciousness just as he released his grip, all the while I just stood there, shrugging it off as if I didn't mind playing the brunt of his momentary amusement. Everyone saw this and took note of my passivity. Not good. It needed rectification, and quickly. What they didn't see was that now, after all the prior verbal abuse and idiotic ridicule he dished my way, he finally marked himself in my payback book. He had to get got. A short time later, maybe only a day or two, again, coming out of the shower, I saw him hassling Eddie, taunting him physically, similarly though perhaps even more harshly as he did me, pushing him to the floor, now in a half crouch hovering over him preparing for whatever he had in mind for the next act. My impression was that Eddie would put a 'shank' between your ribs as soon as have a cup of coffee with you, maybe quicker; it's prison *de rigueur*, but he had no 'shank' at the moment, of that I'm sure, but he did have me. Without much thought, I quickly removed the towel from my shoulders and tightened it over my wet boxers (worn to be washed in the shower along with the rest of me) and quietly

approached them from behind, where, once in range, I quickly grabbed Trailer-park Dave by both ankles, then with all my focused force, a tight grip and a massive heave, yanked them out from under and slung him away from Eddie nearly to the other side of the narrow width of the tier, to which in response, like me the day or so before, a now bruised Dave, his knees banged up, did nothing. Everyone saw that too. It was necessary to show him I had no real reservations about putting my hands on him; all I indeed was a justifiable cause, and hassling my coffee partner provided one. The confession is my initial passivity. No one likes or respects a coward, and my act the day before came close; however, now partly redeemed by that uncompromising hurl across the tile and concrete floor. That's an odd trait of mine; I'm often more willing to put myself in the line of fire for someone else, someone who needs my help, than I am for myself. For others, my fear all but completely disappears. For myself? I may dither. Beats me why, but that's what it is. There was another incident, close to the finish of my term, days away from release, where again, an act of self-preservation and a bit of male vanity of my own, specifically the commitment to emerging from this prison term unmarked, no injuries, handsome as ever, trumped the need to portray myself as a standup jailhouse warrior, which I'll get to later, but here's a teaser: it involved Glen and a slap fight 'game'.

Chapter VI: *It's my moment*

Let's jump way ahead to a point in time about five years from my admission into the guild in '97. By now, the industry dynamic changed radically. The talent agencies no longer had a complete and near-total lock on who got seen for a role and who did not. The internet pushed them to the margins, making it not only possible but commonplace to bring producers and casting directors into direct contact with talent via the web. Existing publications, like the Ross Reports and Backstage, now had a presence online along with a host of others, newcomers, including Actors Access, Casting Networks, Mandy's, and more; there's no point in listing as these were the main ones in my business model. But it was great, a real breakthrough. Now, for a modest subscription fee, these breakdowns, though not the Breakdowns (i.e., the Glengarry Glen Ross leads), and aside from background work, though very few (if any) prime-time network gigs, but plenty of worthwhile projects nonetheless, from music videos with big names to well-paying nonunion television, and now web commercials and leads in independent films, union and non, were not only publicly visible but subscribers could self-submit through their 'porthole' where you had already established a profile detailing your look (headshots), age

range, dimensions, experience and capabilities, including a reel. Can you juggle? List it. Play the harp? List it. Play the harp while juggling, while treading water, blindfolded? List them all. You never know. That sort of thing. You could see what they needed, and they could see what you offered, all of which might lead to an audition and possibly even a booking, a streamlined process which led me to many, many gigs over the years, big and small.

It's the early 2000s, and I'm pretty much a seasoned veteran at the level of a professional film extra, having done tons of background work on the biggest sets, working with the top talent over and over, and even beginning to reach out regularly now that it was more accessible for principal work, mostly but not exclusively, in smaller projects with relatively modest budgets (seldom the major studios — the big projects were still stuck in the old model). But we're talking the much-coveted characters with lines here, and in quality productions, projects I could take justifiable pride in, like the one I'll detail later, and screen credits, and in the case of union gigs, pension and health credits to boot. Booking one of these is a score across the board, with one major caveat I'll describe right now. The union has what they call Golden Rule Number One: *Thou shalt not work any non-union gig, not anywhere on this planet or any other, discovered or not, not at any time, not ever, and not for any reason in this life or any possible following lives.* Aye, there's the rub.

One such memorable gig, keeping it union kosher and working with the tops, was on the set of *American Gangster* (2007) with an entire cast of A-listers. However, I got on, whether it was directly through a self-submission or hired by a background casting company, I can't recall, but it was a three-day gig and I was cast as one of Trupo's (the great Josh Brolin) "dirty detectives." At the same time, a real-life detective from my neighborhood precinct was looking for me. He'd been to my home and left a business card, "*call Detective Griffin*" handwritten on the back. Mazal tov. Shit. I had a fistfight in the elevator of my building with a looney neighbor who sustained a smattering of an injury under his left eye from a punch or two (three or four, maybe?) I threw into his face after being provoked by him in a number of ways, again and again, including but not limited to hurling kitchen utensils at my door while yelling "*Hezbollah!*", and harassing my female neighbors and friends with unwanted, repeated amorous attention, especially an actress colleague who I literally moved into the building. His craziness degraded over the years, from annoying to threatening, then when I finally drew a clear line, he physically pushed me which was when I launched a fuselage of blows, so there was that old familiar surreality raising its head again. Anyway, back on set, I returned his call and bargained with the detective to let me finish out the three-day shoot in exchange for my voluntarily coming in to be booked on a misdemeanor assault charge, third degree. The neighbor, an Iranian refugee and former

acolyte of the Shah's, his entire family now in exile, pressed charges, which I could have and should have too, canceling them both out, but at the time I was in a hurry to get somewhere. Israel was at war again and there was an urgent meeting a few blocks away to decide on strategy, so once my point was made, him on the lobby floor whining for me to stop, I saw no reason to stick around. Like previously stated, once I see surrender, I give it up and move on, which is what happened. Shortly afterwards was when the massive, red-headed bull of an Irish-American detective made the house call.

After negotiating by phone with Detective Paul Bunyon, as to when, how, and with what exact understanding I'd be showing up at the precinct, and him threatening me with the Warrant Squad if I broke our date, by the time I arrived up at the precinct house, I had a defense team with me: a former ADA turned criminal defense attorney, and my first professor and true friend, a native New Yorker about my age and from a similar background, though with a bit more Irish than mine, from John Jay, Eben Bronfman, who served as a special assistant to the long-time and distinguished Manhattan prosecutor, Robert Morgenthau. It was at the start of my first class on my first day of criminal justice school that Eben's booming courtroom baritone told me that I was in for a wild academic ride, plus some, and that we'd likely end up as friends. The ADA was none other than his lovely girlfriend,

Kat Hwang, so it was a solid team. They did what they could to dissuade the cop from charging me at all (it was, after all, a petty charge, not a career-making collar) and, failing that, made sure I walked out of that precinct house with nothing more than an appearance ticket for a case that would probably be dropped shortly after, the only witness being the plaintiff, a schizophrenic paranoid. In either case, I wouldn't be showing up alone, and that was a comfort. The fear was that an error might occur, for example, while booking me, fingerprints and warrant checks, something from a million years ago, something from a million miles away, something that might even have belonged to someone else, might pop up and say “*Hold him!*” and in that case, bad things would follow. Riker’s Island was never, ever, on my ‘bucket list’; in fact, it’s on my *stay-away-from at-all-costs* list. The two of them being with me was insurance in the case of any such curveballs being thrown; I’d have the help needed to sort things out. Meanwhile, I was always at work, or hunting for work.

One of Eben’s tasks was setting up social/professional engagements for the prosecutor, like the annual meet and greet for the new ADAs in the big man’s office. That tête-à-tête required the services of a bartender, meaning in this case, a guy to stand behind the bar and hand out beers to the newcomers, the only bartending skills needed, so I was primed for the gig. That night, just before the score or more of fresh faces showed up, I had the chance to meet and greet the

man himself, Robert Morgenthau, who, seated behind his desk, barked at me for asking some dumb question about a current case. If I was going to be barked at and suck it up as it came, it was going to be the likes of him, so, I sucked it up and carried on, even somewhat flattered to have elicited such a passionate reaction on my first foray into stupidity. Aside from that, the night continued without a hitch, and ended with a fifty-dollar check for my trouble. The next event, the surrealism was even more on display, along with more stupidity and fun.

Despite his tenure—nine consecutive terms—the Manhattan DA in New York City, as with every other borough's prosecutor, must be elected or re-elected every four years. In Morgenthau's case, simply going through the necessary Board of Elections and party motions, the letter and spirit of the law. Unlike the other boroughs' DAs, it's basically a *pro forma* exercise, meaning it's more a ritual than a contest—a chance for the home team, the Democrats, to slap each other's backs and shake each other's hands at the routine fundraisers in celebration of their continued success in dominating the city's government and agencies.

This particular fundraiser, the professor and special assistant got me on board with, was held at the Chelsea Piers studio where they shot all the interiors for *Law and Order*, a set I worked many times. Being there again, in a very different

capacity, checking the real Manhattan DA's guests in as they exited the third-floor elevator, included a sense of irony and the surreal I couldn't shake. Now the surreally fun part.

Ed McDonald is not any type of Hollywood celebrity, but I sure as hell knew who he was. In fact, watching and listening to him on screen in one of Scorsese's classics: "*Don't give me the babe-in-the-woods routine, Karen, we've got you on tape...*" I thought to myself, this guy's no actor, he's the real thing, but I sure didn't expect him to come strolling out of that elevator. And there he was. I 'made' him right away. It fit. There we both were, where the two worlds overlap. It was my chance. I jumped up off my station to greet him and brought a delighted smile to his face by quoting him his lines and telling him how believable he was, as if he had been an actor and not an actual federal prosecutor. The thing is, I couldn't stop. Every time he was in earshot for the rest of the evening, I started doing it again, "*If he's legitimately bronchial, we'll consider that,*" until he gradually stopped smiling, I could see he was slowly getting annoyed, but it was too cool an opportunity to pass up. He was great. The script is great, and that's a film I would've given my wisdom teeth to get even a single line in, all four. "*Everybody loved Stacks,*" but this was the closest I'd ever get. The party was over once I saw that annoyed look on his face. I knew it was a wrap, figuring I'm probably the only guy here with a three felony conviction rap sheet, not a great idea to get myself too well established on his

radar, so, I wrapped it, but that sure was fun while it lasted.
“I’ve listened to those wiretaps, you’re talking about cocaine.”

Meanwhile, back in movie making wonderland



We were shooting a few pivotal scenes up in the bucolic recesses of Westchester County. The set—a three-floor furnished mansion with something like ten or fifteen bedrooms—was on a huge estate leased by the production company. Of course, since this was a big-budget project financed by a major studio, they hired an all-star cast including Ruby Dee, Denzel Washington, Josh Brolin, and Russell Crowe. As it turned out, only Ms. Dee and Mr. Brolin would be there those days, and it was exciting to see them around, but not Crowe. We were ‘B’ unit shooting ‘B roll’ anyway, meaning insert shots not involving the leads. However, someone even more interesting, that I did get to kinda’ meet, was on hand. Stay tuned.

Before getting back to the drama on the set of “*American Gangster*”, it was on another very cool project I got on where I had already shared a scene with Mr. Crowe in “*A Beautiful Mind*” (2001), it was no big deal not seeing him there, and I didn’t expect to. I was on the lookout for bigger game anyhow, actors don’t often hire actors, as in people who might cast me, like on the set of that multi-award-winning film back then when none other than grown-up Opie himself, the great Ron Howard, met and selected me, already cast as one of four ‘*suspicious characters*’ (specifically casting short men for big cars), to be the one to make it on screen. Why ‘short’? I never found out, but it might have had something to do with the oversized sedans we were using, making them look even larger? Climbing out gracefully from the front passenger seat to the pavement from one of these 40-50s Motor City behemoths requires either long legs or a long drop. I had to work the drop into my normal-looking gait, but the size discrepancy between the limo and passenger is still read by the camera. Maybe that was the point. “Suspicious” looking? Because the lead character, the schizophrenic but brilliant mathematician, John Nash, is having an episode. Otherwise? I dunno. Anyway, after almost half a full day in the wardrobe trailer, the other half in hair and makeup, where they shaved my beard and where, to the department’s consternation and dread, I casually whistled the theme to “*The Andy Griffith Show*” (“*Don’t even think about letting him hear you whistle that. He hates it!*”).

Once the sun went down on the clear autumn night, one of the PAs brought all four of us to the set—an asphalt and brick public schoolyard in Jersey City—where, under the schoolyard lights, we were greeted by the man himself, alone. When Opie saw me, and saw me see him, at eye contact, my inner smile broke through cause I’m hearing that whistling theme song in my head during that entire thrilling stroll across the yard to meet him. It was as if I’d grown up with him, from *Mayberry*, to *American Graffiti*, to *Happy Days*, meaning it felt somehow like we were acquainted, and my impression was that he picked up on it, so he picked me. That’s my guess. I would be the ‘suspicious character’ to step out of that oversized sedan, be seen on camera, and spook the nutty professor. That was a great rush, one for the books quite literally, and a lot of fun. But I took a pass on telling him about my jailhouse nickname, *Cunningham*. That might have to wait for the wrap party over a few beers.

When I got a call for a gig, as usual, the only information they give is what’s needed: the location, the call time, and my check-in number, and whatever wardrobe ‘options’ they wanted me to bring along. I may not even know the name of the project, or like with Woody Allen projects, as yet unnamed, just a reference like WA Fall project ‘97. You don’t get told who the leads are, the director is, nothing, because

none of that matters to background actors, at least not at that stage.

That morning when I found out who and what, I was pretty, pretty-very, psyched, even more than usual just to be on set and working, and now again, a chance to work with the very top talent, actually counted among them, beats the living hell out being counted among unholy and unwanted in the county-lock up scene, really. Wow... But I don't know the script, the story, my 'motivation', nothing unless I'm told, which is not until the AD's start giving direction, what to do on "*Action!*". Then, just as we finally start shooting, first take, or as they say "camera rehearsal", one car stationary, already in frame on its mark, the other, mine, just out of frame, on "action" we pulled up into the frame, alongside, just behind and slightly ahead of the first car, come to a slow stop, count a half-beat before I step out from the front passenger seat onto the street. "*CUT!*" That's when they start to make adjustments, fine-tuning. Then, in that process, hopefully not too many takes, they make it clear.

The scene is shot from Nash's point of view, an exterior nighttime, he's up in a second-floor bedroom peering between the blinds, but that's all I know aside the 'blocking' (the scene's choreography). There were three walkie-talkies in play, one in each car and a third up in the bedroom with the DP and Opie who are literally calling the shots through the

first AD from up there by the camera. “*Action... Stop. Okay, Rob, step out of the car. Now look up at the window. Now down at the windshield. Back up at the window. Stop smiling, Rob.*” I was enjoying myself, as I said, this was really, really cool, so why not? I knew nothing about the project or the scene, so they had to explain it. “*You look ‘suspicious’, Rob. Spooky. Solemn but not very expressive, we’re not going for ‘big’ here. It’s mostly his paranoid fantasy. Small. I’ll give direction. We’re tight on you. Okay? We’re going again everybody. Back to first position.*” Again and again, maybe five or six times until they got what they needed, and it was a wrap.

On the way back to the wardrobe trailer to return their clothes before checking out, momentarily by myself in the yard, I spotted Mr. Howard walking across the yard headed in the opposite direction about ten yards from me, again by himself. In the split second we passed each other and made eye contact, it was like a follow-up to the first time. He gave a nod of approval and a slight smile. He was pleased, and I made the final cut. A highlight, and perhaps even according to IMDb, my claim to fame. (*Hey, I’ll take it. One great way to make a buck.*)

Now back in the Westchester mansion with “*American Gangster*”, a much bigger surprise was in store along those lines. Someone else was there, someone I didn’t even know

was attached to the project, that someone being the great *Sir Ridley Scott*, the film's brilliant director, one of my favorites and one of the very best.

On day one of the shoot, another thrill was seeing one of my favorite makeup ladies, a woman with one of the all-time greatest rear assets I ever saw on the job. A vintage model, late-thirties to early forties, an Italian American chiquita-bonita with tattoos on her feet, who flirted with me on an earlier set, some film starring Nicole Kidman. I forget the name, but I was cast as the homeless guy, a featured spot, whom she had the privilege of making up in the trailer for several hours. Yeah, they really take their time, in part to justify their inflated union wages, and in part because that's what they do and they want to do a good job. Mind you, now this is important, not *one of the* homeless guys or *one of four* suspicious characters but *the* homeless guy, a huge distinction.

Meanwhile, today, on this set, as soon as she realized I was only one of the detectives (i.e., a lowly background actor), one of perhaps a half dozen or more, not *the* detective (at the very least a specifically casted featured background actor), that said huge distinction produced a vastly different effect. Now, I was a nobody, a schnook with the temerity to make a play for her, as if, as if, we were just man and woman, male and female, and in that sense and only that sublime sense perish the thought, equals.

It's not clear how the conversation started, but I was excited to see her. It's basically the same small community of industry pros—the grips, sound department, lighting, wardrobe, hair, makeup, all the techies, teamsters, and production people—that work the big sets in New York, so you run into the same faces again and again. Not every face on every set, but in the longer run, yes, the same small community appears over and over, so although it was not totally unexpected, it was still a surprise, thus, exciting. In fact, it was the first time I'd seen her since the set before when I was the homeless guy seated in her makeup chair, lapping up all her delicious attention. Anyway, my reaction? Think: friendly, and maybe a bit (too) flirty. What's certain is it communicated my continued interest, to which she almost immediately, wait for it, exploded with an immediate and unrestrained fit of visceral indignation, as in '*How dare you? Who do you think you are? A movie star? The executive producer? You're a nobody in my eyes and don't you forget it. Nobody! Got it? Nobody,*' type of rant. She wasn't having it, my audacious temerity, and everyone in earshot needed to hear her raging routine featuring disproportionate righteous indignation and disgust. There was no calming her. Her vanity, I suppose, was offended, which I guess anyone tattooing their feet might carry an abundance of. It was visceral, as if her survival had been at stake. There may have been something else actually troubling on her mind that day, nothing to do with me, that happens, so rather than add fuel to the fire by trying to calm

and reassure her that I knew my place, I just stood there inside the brightly lit, early morning makeup trailer allowing her center stage without interfering or showing any type of reactive response, assuming my well-practiced deadpan while she melted away. (*Really, who the fuck was she? I was being friendly, flirty, so what?*) It was disappointing, sure, and a bit embarrassing, getting yelled at publicly in my thirties like a miscreant schoolboy, but mostly I felt ashamed for her, coming off like an unhinged lunatic at a humble film extra. Background actors are usually on the obsequious side on set; we know we can be replaced, if not by production then certainly by casting, even after being established on film, but that seldom happens. So, I just stood there a few feet away, watched the spectacle, and listened to her raving on and on. Fortunately for me, even us union background actors are not actually ordinary schlubs on set, that is to say, we are card-carrying, dues-paying members of the Screen Actors Guild, the same union as the stars and day-players (makeup “artists” have their own union), and because of that, we cannot be fired without due cause, a big deal, and any attempt requires a later formal, sit-down with both union and production reps. My gentle flirtation with a grown woman, also supposed to be a professional, wasn’t going to make for that kind of case, not by a long shot. At some point, maybe only a minute or two after her harangue began, a long minute or two, one of the PAs or ADs, maybe even an on-set union rep walked me away and told me not to pay her any mind, just

be cool and keep it loose, focus on doing my job, which I did. Actually, there were bigger opportunities available here than maybe getting a piece of this chiquita-bonita's voluptuous derriere, which now seemed even less likely (like, zero chance), so I shrugged it off and switched gears, kept it moving forward. But that rapid and radical decline in my value in her eyes was worth noting. Rule of thumb? The lower end players in almost every industry are often the biggest snobs. And almost as soon as I stepped away, much better opportunities did arise.

Better opportunities

First off, my look. The role, as I said, was one of a handful of maybe six or seven of Trupo's (Brolin) "detective" squad. It's ironic that playing tough guys, or just bad guys, or playing straight up good cops, heroes, the actor's physical appearance, or 'look' is often practically the same, so if you can sell yourself as one, the other is basically built in. And today, like several times before and many more again, the role was a combination of both, if I'm a cop? It's a corrupt cop. If I'm a family man, a father figure type, it's an unhinged, dangerous one, a big shot banker? A swindler.. etc. Get the idea? And I could readily see that today, and as usual, I really, really looked the part which helped give me the confidence needed to perform at peak in that rarefied environment, even in the

limited capacity of a background character. Regardless of my position, this was the big time, surrounded by top talent professionals in every department working this gig, when the pressure to perform drives you to rise to the occasion, i.e., all ‘A game’, all the time, even for ‘B roll’.

The scene we were shooting was another montage, 'B unit' quick take inserts in various rooms of the mansion where Trupo's squad is literally tearing the place apart, looking for drugs, cash, jewels and anything that can be used as evidence, while Ruby Dee, Frank Lucas's (Denzel Washington) mother, who he bought the house for, watches helplessly in horror as we ripped paintings down from the walls, overturned furniture, breaking up whatever we could get our hands on. At one point, between takes, while the entire crew was busy setting up the next take of the same scene, a different camera angle, one of the ADs placed me in a comfortable-looking armchair positioned in the center of a reading room, or den, taking a cigarette break as the orchestrated chaos spins around him. This was a score. I knew almost immediately and almost for sure that it was an amazingly cool, badass featured spot and would most likely make it past the editors. It was supposed to illustrate the amoral nonchalance of these bad cops. He handed me a cigarette and told me my action was to just sit there, comfortably, light up and enjoy the entertainment of watching the police wrecking crew doing their thing all around me, knowing that whatever of the

ill-gotten gains they find, a share of it would be mine. Happily, I took the seat and tried to keep a low profile in a momentarily very high-profile spot, not talk to anyone or ask annoying questions, just stay put and let the scene and the camera roll around me. After a few minutes, while all the fast-paced departments were busy setting up, a compact, middle-aged, light-haired and complexioned, almost cherubic and slightly overweight man came up to me and asked: “*Do you smoke?*” Remember Volume I? The “*Honesty's the best policy*” line being “*the first lie they teach you*”? Well, I forgot, and told the truth. “No,” I answered. “*Not anymore.*” “*Okay, we need someone who smokes. Step out please.*” Dammit! A perfect spot for me to help claim my fifteen seconds of fame, as good or better than emerging from the sedan to spook Russell Crowe. Well, there’s no arguing, if someone gives me a direction on set (excluding a makeup lady) my job is to execute. But this was urgent, so I spoke up right away, not having any idea exactly who he was while it’s assumed he had the authority to make that call, but before getting up to move away, surrendering that choice spot, I tried my luck: “*I’ll smoke! I’ll smoke!*” “*That’s okay,*” he replied, “*Step out, please,*” meaning *nothin’ doin’*. *Forget it.* As I stood up and began walking off the set I said, quietly, but deliberately loud enough for him to hear, “*I want to be in the movie*” like a nagging five-year-old told recess was over, to which the guy quickly responded: “*Don’t worry, we’ll get you in something.*” And that was it. As soon as I got off the set and out of that

room, the same AD came up to me and asked: "*Do you know who that was?*" "No. Who?" "*That was the director, Sir Ridley Scott.*" Wow, I thought. This is freaking cool. Ridley Scott kicked me off set. The genius himself. Yes! Sir Ridley Scott. Really cool. Right up there with "*Be lively*". And the next day? Back on "B unit", upstairs in one of the bedrooms, I surely was, a much tighter scene opening on me, and my even more cool action.

Sure enough, come the following day, another AD brought me upstairs to one of the bedrooms where the next shot was being set up. Inside, there were all of us "dirty detectives" about to trash this expensively decorated, elegant lady's bedroom. The setup of the camera was focused on me, separated from it only by the width of the queen-sized bed. Next to the bed on my side, just in front of me to my right at the head of the bed, was a small night table with a fancy lamp and an antique-looking jewelry box next to it.

On "*Action!*", my move was to gently lift up the small jewelry box as if to carefully, respectfully examine the contents, and then on cue, someone, one of the principal day-players, says, "*Fuck this place,*" at which point I turn it upside down, allowing the contents to come pouring out of it and land on the table below, which together with the box's contents is about to get heaved across the room by yours truly, followed by the rest of us going full-on human hurricane, tearing up

nearly the entire room, top to bottom. It was brutal (and cathartic!), but the amazing thing was how quickly the art department set the room back up. We threw the queen-size mattress off the bed, dresser drawers, and framed paintings from the walls, along with the night table flung across the room nearly hitting both actors and crew, and in general tearing the place to shreds, everything except the wallpaper and carpeting—an extended moment of contrived, sublime chaos. After about thirty seconds of action, on “*Cut!*” the art department, like a Mario Andretti pit crew at the Daytona 500, went to work putting everything back together, even replacing shattered painting glass with new paintings on hand, and within less than five minutes, we were ready to shoot again.

The teenage rebel me, volcanic *Kabbo*, smashed things up routinely, mainly other people's, disregarding the eventual cost to everyone, ultimately including me, only this time, not only was there no cost, but this is great fun; we're all busting out with laughter between takes, like delinquent children on a holiday, and I'm even getting paid for it. Surreality again. Add to that and all together with my real-life appointment with that detective back at home who was going to “collar” me for that assault charge, the whole thing was just too weird to ignore and not preserve in this telling.

That was one of the main things I really connected with in the industry, that high bar. That was one of the main things I

really connected with in the industry: that high bar. One time on *Law and Order*, we were shooting an exterior in Central Park, not far from my pied-à-terre. At the top of the shot, they positioned me in deep background, far from but facing the camera, seated on an older bicycle. On “*Action!*”, I’m supposed to ride towards the camera and cross camera right quickly in front of the two leads, which makes the scene look pretty real, a quick ‘*foreground wipe*,’ as they call it. On cue, as I start to ride, the gears lock up and the bike won’t roll. Or maybe it was the brakes. I don’t recall or never knew. But it wasn’t moving. That I knew.

In less than two seconds, the 1st AD yells “*Cut!*”, and a three-man team of techies, grips, and what have you ran to my position and on it, identifying the problem and fixed it with barely a skipped beat. There was no “*Where’s the wrench? Who has the wrench?*” or “*Who knows about bicycle brakes? Can someone else please help?*” Nothing like that. It was just fixed and in no time flat. Everyone went back to first position, and then we shot the scene. Not a big deal but definitely emblematic of the zeitgeist on set: *we get it done. The show must go on.* A bike brake locking up at just the wrong moment when every second counts, a routine hiccup addressed with routine professionalism. That’s what really turned me on about the business, a sense I got even from that first music video shoot for that memorable twenty-five bucks.

The next day back in Westchester, the last of the three-day shoot, was perhaps even cooler. That morning, right after the standard cornucopia feast of breakfast (How would you like your burrito? Pancakes? Omelets? English muffins? Cinnamon raisin or plain? Perhaps whole wheat? Peppercorns on your lox? Cream cheese with or without chives? Fresh-squeezed orange juice, or grapefruit, perhaps a blend? Cranberry, maybe? Herbal teas or fresh-ground, gourmet javas?) and we're all checked in, makeup, hair, wardrobe, the whole process, another 2nd AD comes into the background holding space and asks the detectives: "*Who drives?*" Okay, I don't smoke but I sure can drive, so I raised my hand. He counted out the five or six of us and after checking our licenses told us that we'll be doing some driving at the end of the day, so prepare, it would be somewhat challenging and we would get a 'bump' (an increase in pay on top of but not added to the base, thereby avoiding the union rule requiring production to hire highly paid, unionized, and insured professional stunt drivers) which, along with overtime, along with 'meal penalties' (increments of union scale), would have made the paycheck soar, but even without that, it was gonna be more money to take home, an extra \$50, and it would also be a lot of fun as well as a resume builder, 'precision driver', if we could pull it off without any accidents or injuries. The rest of the day was spent pretty much just hanging around, taking selfies in wardrobe with my prop .38 snub nose, exploring the property, gorging on the endless bounty of food

and snacks including sit-down meals, and keeping away from tattooed foot lady, generally doing pretty much what extras are paid to do, i.e., always being available, you don't want to have them call you twice, but never in the way.

By about 5PM, we were assembled on the property's sprawling front lawn where the same AD pointed out five or six 'period cars' taking the roles of unmarked police cars lined up bumper-to-bumper on the driveway facing the house: big seventies-style sedans, pale green Impalas with huge motors and no 'power' anything, black Crown Victorias, that type of look. The kind you never notice until they pounce. There would be two men in each car, a driver and a front seat passenger, and we would have to drive up that long, curving, maybe seventy-yard driveway as close to one another as we could, front bumper to rear, trying to keep the distance at only a few feet apart, and hold that positioning steady while moving pretty fast, maybe 30-35 mph uphill on sharp curves.

The script had it as a morning raid, our arrival, the insert shot before tearing the rooms apart: here comes the dirty squad, in a big hurry as if it was a real bust and not a shakedown, which of course it was. First, we'd have to take the cars down to the public road, a sometimes busy, 45 mph county road with limited forward visibility, meaning we could have been hit by another passenger car as we were idling, waiting for the call to action, then start driving uphill along the twisting driveway in

tight formation as described. The cue would be given with walkie-talkies each car was equipped with, so down to the road we drove, in reverse, backwards. Because the cars were parked facing the house, and there was no room to turn them around on the narrow driveway, so backwards was the fastest way to get into first position after each take. And these things really flew meaning a light foot with just the right amount of press makes all the difference, so *get it together, now. Okay men? Let's roll!* Here come my Arkay Trucking skills! Precision driving. I got this!

Back and forth we did it again and again, uphill and back down, not missing a beat and without so much as tapping a bumper, front or rear, all focus and intention, all of us, rising to the occasion. We're going to do this thing, like an Indy 500 pit crew again. At one point, the voice over the walkie talkie applied more pressure: "*we're chasing daylight*" meaning because the exterior shot is a daytime scene, early morning, taking the quarry by surprise, we need to get this done even more quickly because 'chasing' means losing, as in the sun is now setting. That's what it's like on set many times, you wait around all day, doing crossword puzzles and eating snacks, maybe learning scripts or preparing for an audition in the downtime, then all of a sudden, they call for your scene up next, then everyone's in a big rush. Love it or leave it, but you're not gonna change it.

Well, we did it, and I loved it and collected the big fifty buck ‘bump’ for our effort. I wish there was a happier ending to the tale, like my trashing the bedroom shot making the final cut, but alas, except for a few fuzzy split seconds in the fast-flowing montage it did not, at least not in the initial theatrical release. But I did get to connect with the knight, Sir Ridley, and I did get to do that crazy cool driving and trash that bedroom and I do have this tale to tell, not bad for a former trucker, jailbird-gigolo, cabbie, criminal justice student, neighbor puncher and now film actor. And after all, the editing room floor is part of showbiz too. By the way, there is an elongated version of the film, a ‘director’s cut’ with almost twenty more minutes of footage, so perhaps my “*fuck this place*” moment of fame can be found somewhere there. Perhaps though? Not. Showbiz.

“That’s a bump, kid.”

Joe Pantoliano, “Joey Pants,” might not be an A-list actor or a celebrity name, but to guys like me—guys who enjoy gangster films, actors portraying gangsters, and even, in too many cases, the real-life thing, actual gangsters themselves—the cult of the twentieth-century American antihero, we know him well. As an actor in that genre, he’s among the best, meaning among the most convincing. Some folks are fans of pro athletes and follow their careers; they know all the stats, their

trials and tribulations, the ‘thrill of victory, and the agony of defeat.’ Others follow musicians and dig into the details, personal and artistic; what did Bob Dylan tell the Beatles that changed their style? Some people follow writers, actors, singers, or statesmen, with the same passion. I like *wiseguys*, make-believe on the screen, and even occasionally the real thing on the stage of life, where I follow their ‘stats’ accordingly. For example, I can rattle off the names of several members of “Murder, Inc.” and tell you their fates, from Abe Reles to Louis Capone to “Red” Levine and “Tic Toc” Tannenbaum. I know how D.A. Dewey tripped up Charlie “Lucky” Luciano on the stand and how my doppelganger Meyer Lansky helped get him sprung early from a fifty-year bid upstate for prostitution, the only crime they could nail him with, so they went extra heavy on the sentencing. I can tell you how the Italian ‘black hand’ took the Brooklyn waterfront goldmine from the Irish ‘white hand’ and the role Al Capone played in that “hostile takeover,” the seminal act of his budding career. I even admire the “Teflon Don” John Gotti for his *cosa nostra* integrity, and aside from Sammy “the bull”’s undeniable storytelling skills, grampa’ underboss, I have no time for him. In other words, I eat this stuff up.

So, when I saw Joey “Pants” on the set of the film *U.S. Marshals* (1998), I perked up. It was otherwise going to be a relatively boring shoot for me, one of a handful of “ND (nondescript) background” seated at a small downtown

luncheonette where the leads were having some sort of weekday afternoon meeting. Pretty dull stuff, even in the company of big-time movie stars. But seeing Joey Pants was an opportunity, if not for anything else, then to at least say, *'Hello, Joe, great to meet you, I'm a big fan'*.

Before having the chance to say *"Hey Joe, where you goin' with that script in your hand?"*, I witnessed an interaction between the project's main lead, the A-lister *Tommy Lee Jones*, and someone on his staff, probably a personal assistant, which left a lasting impression. It was during a break between takes, with the background actors sitting tight around the luncheonette tables, quietly waiting for the crew to finish setting up and the next call to 'action'. The assistant approached Mr. Jones with a cellphone in his hand extended towards him. He got no closer than about three feet when Tommy Lee stopped him with a slight raising of his right hand in a *'come no closer'* gesture. Though it was out of earshot, I saw Tommy Lee's face drop as he all but jumped back away from the guy and the extended phone, like it was kryptonite, as if to say: *'The mere thought of wasting any of my precious, and limited time on this Earth, even a nanosecond on that call is literally repulsive, so forget it, get it away from me and get it away from me now.'* I got it. The studio is probably paying him a king's ransom for every minute on that set, and he doesn't want to waste their money or his time on anything other than the exact and exclusive purpose of his being there.

Time, to which he is finely attuned, is his most precious and irreplaceable commodity, so there was no pause or hesitation in his reflexive response. Once he got the drift, it was immediate and irrevocable. That stuck. The preciousness of time, not just his, but everyone's, even while seated here in the luncheonette set waiting patiently for the next event to respond to. I saw it all in that instant, and certain gesture. Now, I thought, that's what I call acting.

Sometime later, during another break, I got close enough to Joe to start a brief chat. It's not clear why it felt so natural, but after greeting him, I reached for the fabric of his polo shirt sleeve and gave it a slow tug to get to the feel of the material. It looked expensive, and I wanted to take note of it with a touch of friendly sarcasm. "*New Zealand Merino wool and Siamese silk*," he gloated, then reached for mine, a pullover mock turtleneck, and gave it a similar tug. "*Pure Mexican cotton*," I replied with a slight grin and a sly wink, "100%." We both laughed, and that was it for that shoot. But I made an impression on the guy, and it felt great; he was a role model, like it was worth being there just for those two moments of lasting memory.

A short time later, maybe only a month or two, on another set, *Taxman* (1998), and this time Joey "Pants" was the lead. I was cast as one of four or five Russian thug-like longshoremen in a dismal, late winter exterior daytime scene where Joe, a

Treasury agent, approaches the group of us standing around looking bored beside a vacant dock on the Brooklyn waterfront to question us about something to do with whatever was going on there.

According to the script, we were Russian immigrants who spoke no English, so our job as BG was to acknowledge his presence, but then ignore him. The director, Avi Nesher, didn't give us much direction, sort of leaving it up to us to respond naturally, except directing us that we were not pleased by his appearance. Okay. Not pleased. Got it. Anything else? No? Okay. One order of "not pleased" comin' up.

On the third or fourth take of him approaching, saying a few lines, then, getting no response, walking away in frustration, for some reason, I guess you could call it 'acting', call it boredom, call it I dunno what, but just as he turned to walk away, I suddenly spat a mouthful of coffee I had been drinking at his feet, registering 'not pleased' with vigorous disgust. That was not in the script, neither was what followed.

Joey "Pants" goes berserk, starts cussing as he races back to me, grabs me by the shoulders, and tries to put me in a headlock, so we start wrestling back and forth, pushing and pulling in an attempt to gain leverage. As we scuffled, I'm thinking: what the hell is actually going on here? What did I get myself into? Am I nuts? Is he really angry? Is he acting

too? What am I supposed to do? Try to beat him up? Let him win? If this is all he has, he's not all that strong. I think I can flip him onto his back without much strain, I can feel it. I probably had more real-life street fights in one month than he's had in his entire life, including his movie life, but I better not, he might get hurt, and he's the lead so that probably won't work. Maybe he's holding back too and can lay me out if he really tries. What am I gonna do now? Think of something quick!

Instead of putting any real force into it, I remembered then reached for the prop pistol tucked into my pants waist, pulled it out, and tried to stick the barrel into his gut as if that's where I would pull the trigger, at which point he did some kind of karate move and chopped my forearm so I dropped it. That's when Nesher called out "*Cut! That's a wrap!*" Once we broke, I could see Joey smiling, it was cool, I gave him something to work with, and just as he turned to walk off set, before leaving he turned back around and looked my way then said: "*That's a bump, kid.*" Now I was smiling too.

When the paycheck came, I saw none of it. No bump. Nor did it make the final cut. But I still had that fun, playing tough guy in that crazy zone between art and real life with one of the best, and now, me and Joey "Pants" were practically paisans. That all said, except for a union meeting during the strike of 2007, I never saw him live again. Too bad. He mighta' helped

me out if he could, shed some Merino wool and silk my way, mentors in this racket are hard to come by, but you never know. It's pretty much everyone in it for themselves, how I even got that far is a testament to tenacity more than it is to talent, or connections. Just find a direction and keep pushing. And, y'know what? Them's the breaks. Life is tough, and this life, not as tough as others but tougher than most, professionally speaking that is, is showbiz.

“Okay. You’re on.” It’s my moment. Let’s show’m what I got.

On the way to camera-gangster fulfillment, instilled a long, long while back, there were still a lot of dues to pay. You don’t get to be taken seriously when deciding to step up onto the showbiz parade after twelve years as a trucker and say: “*Okay. I’m ready now. Here I am. The guy you’ve all been waiting for. Now, where’s my script? My trailer? My contract and check?*” No. “An actor’s life for me” was like some type of cosmic or dharma thing that needed catching up with and working out, or off before anyone ever handed me a script. Legendary Danny Aiello types are few and far between, thus the legend. But there I was, starting in my mid-thirties, and at the bottom where the industry had me. Back as that small kid, then into junior high, I was in it, the plays at camps, the drama club at

school, the make-believe games with my sister and friends, even the tin foil sword fights up on the Brooklyn rooftops with the *Poliandros* (Vol. I), loved the fantasy game, but by adolescence, I let that all go in favor of other more compelling teenage pursuits such as sex, drugs, and rock'n roll in whatever combinations I could grab, and usually in reverse order with my *Kabbo* the renegade outlaw fantasy until that life ended with a dramatic enough bang. What followed was the free-wheeling days and title of Volume II, until around a decade later concluding not with another bang this time but the proverbial extended whimper. So there was a lot of catching up to do. I could see that and made peace with it. There was no regret about the time spent in the trucking life, I enjoyed it all, yeah, the gypsy trucker, the “*Boss*” always on the move, saving the day and the sudden unexpected cost of a hoist by carrying a nine-foot-long conference table up twenty-one flights of midtown Manhattan stairs for the hefty sum of an extra five-hundred, making money sometimes hand over fist, it was cool hunting for opportunities and calling my own shots, but it's not the recommended path for launching a career in showbiz, that's for sure, so I had to start where I would have left off back in junior high, meaning in this case, extras' holding, and I was grateful to even be there, especially as a union member. My motto soon became: grateful for everything, entitled to nothing.

That all said, it was time well spent. All the hustle not only brought me into regular direct contact with the industry's top talent but gave me something purposeful and useful to do with them, a *raison d'être* in the form of a clearly defined purpose, not only working towards eventually getting my dharma right but also serving as a learning academy. It was acting school for me, just watching the top pros doing their thing close up, performing live, right in front of me, again and again and again. Another commensurate and useful perk was learning how to conduct myself on a film set and interact with other players and positions in the business, from PAs to executive producers, more of a learned practice than a developed skill, and like in any enterprise, you need both if you plan to move ahead. But the best part was actually participating in the creation process of an art you most definitely want to be part of, even if only to be the featured 'guy getting fussed over by strippers' on a film set make-believe strip bar. I'll take it. Then I'll take some more.

None of those exercises gives you talent though; that comes from elsewhere, perhaps the Divine, but they do help focus whatever you might have, and that's almost as important. So, I never disparaged it, extra work, not in the least, while all the time aspiring for more, because that was the call. Specifically, it was to be more a statement and testimony to what I did with my time under the sun than any type of artistic contribution or creative statement, similar to the intent of these memoirs: to

leave a mark somewhere else besides the public record, a high-school and boot camp dropout, with the only notable highlights being a long, ridiculous criminal record (A burglar? A vandal? A drunk driver and shoplifter? Two gun possession convictions? Who was I? Jesse James? “Pretty Boy” Floyd? Dirty Harry?), a guy whose entire existence amounted to a societal minus: *'Rob was a waste. He did nothing with his life, he made trouble then disappeared. Good riddance.'* Forget that. No. More like let the record show that I survived myself long enough to demonstrate to whoever cared to notice that after that long and dangerous period of looney tunes recklessness, out-of-control resentment and instability, he somehow got a grip and turned things around. That's what becoming a professional actor was intended to demonstrate. I couldn't change the past, no, but I could add to it, like with that Certificate from the parole people and a degree with honors in criminal justice, and now this, a body of film and TV work and an IMDb profile of professional, public acting credits to match. That was my humble and sincere aspiration. Mostly that, and having fun while at it, and not much more.

To that end, a significant 'more' came in the form of a major 'bump,' an 'upgrade' from background to principal one night in 2003 in, of all places, the Bronx, on the set of a film titled Nola. That unexpected boost left me with the knowledge, a posteriori, that I could do it. It wasn't merely a wish or a fantasy like my Al Capone's protégé delusion, but there was

something available in me that could make a valuable contribution to the medium. All that was needed was the right opportunity to demonstrate it, and my job was to be on hand so when my ticket came up, like the boy scout motto of yore, ‘be prepared’, and perhaps with a finer point, a working definition of luck: preparedness meets opportunity, it would get punched.

It was the third of a three-night shoot, the night I made my bones not as a mafia hitman but as a camera actor at the Bronx County Criminal Court, main gallery, cast as a courtroom reporter. Kristine Bulakowski, a petite and effervescent independent background casting agent hired by production, booked me, so Petina the producer, a bosomy brunette with a winning smile and neighborhood friend, had no idea I'd be there, nor I, she. As soon as I got to set the first night and she saw me? She freaked, let out a sudden shriek of surprised delight. This was the film she spoke to me about a year or so before, the one she said she was producing and might have a role for me in as Emma, the lead's father. I knew her from the gym in my building, so it was almost like running into a neighborhood sister from home. Back then, she gave me her number, and a day or two later, I gave her a call, left a message, but never heard back or called again. Basically, I forgot all about it until that night when we saw each other and she let out that shriek.

In my neighborhood, among the delusional and the wannabes, there are many people actually producing films and television programs, up and down the budget scale, or somehow involved in the industry in one professional capacity or another. People producing films, or claiming to, are quite common, meaning it was no big deal and didn't seem to warrant any added attention beyond that first and only call, until that shriek. At that moment when she ran to me, everyone now watching in muted attention, especially after she hugged me tightly in front of the entire cast, crew, and director, that's when I knew she was for real, and I probably should've made a second or even a third call. For what it's worth, good or bad, chasing people is not my thing—not for gigs, not for money, not for sex either, not for anything really. If you put me in a position where I need to chase you, I may go through the mandatory motions once or twice, but after that, if no tangible progress is being made, I'll cut my losses and redirect. There are always other avenues to pursue my goals along where the price doesn't demand my dignity or self-respect. My skin can be thin, so begging ain't my thing, I'd just as soon make do without. Outside of a very specific goal and within a very limited scope and timeframe, as this project clearly should have fit, I simply don't do it. More about that maybe later.

It wasn't a big-budget production, probably only about half a million, which by industry standards is modest, independently

financed mostly by the director, Alan Hruska, a retired entertainment lawyer living his movie-director dream. But it still had some pretty big names: the lovely Emmy Rossum in the lead, Mary McDonnell, who was nominated for an Oscar for *Dances with Wolves*, and the renowned Steve Bauer, who played Pacino's best friend in *Scarface* (now three times the girth). All three of them were working this scene, and now, surprise surprise, there would be a fourth.

While seated at the same dining table as Alan and Petina during a meal on the third night, after overhearing my caffeinated rants on whatever unrelated topics I had on my mind for the past two shoot nights (and I'm sure with Petina's persuasion), he came up to me on a break between takes and asked, hypothetically, of course, “*What would you be asking the leads, specifically Mary's character, the suddenly acquitted defendant, if you were an intrepid reporter covering the trial determined to get past her security (Bauer) and get a quote?*”

By the way, that first night before I left for the Bronx from Manhattan, dressed in my own selected wardrobe, I could see, as reflected by the image in the mirror, how well my look matched the character. And like Robert Morse's “*I Believe in You*,” I heard my inner voice encourage me, “*Rob, you ARE a courtroom reporter.*” As soon as I heard the question, I immediately started rambling on again, this time on-topic, and within thirty seconds of listening, he said, “*Okay, you're on.*

After the meal break we shoot. Get ready.” By “*get ready*,” he meant improvise my own lines and be otherwise ready to roll. Alan just wanted to see how quickly I could think on my feet, no special jargon required, and what the delivery would look and sound like, i.e., gauge my raw talent. It was a ‘holy shit’ moment if I ever had one. That’s exactly the kind of ‘magic moment’ every background actor craves but seldom, if ever, materializes. Yet here it was, the ever-elusive but always tantalizing possibility of an onset upgrade to principal.

Next thing you know, the 2nd AD is handing me a day-player contract, and instead of eating, I’m pacing up and down the hallways, adrenaline pumping on overdrive, rehearsing to myself the lines I’m conjuring. From “Action!” onward, it was gonna be all on me, and all improv. Talk about pressure to perform? Right before we broke for the meal, he brought me up to the three stars already positioned in the front of the courtroom and told them that he’s changing the script for the next scene (but really, he’s asking them), explaining what he has in mind. We looked at Mary and Steve; Emma was oblivious (I think she was preoccupied by looking at her bare feet for some reason). I half expected them to balk and say, “*Huh? We don't know this guy. He's an extra! We're not doing lines with an extra.*” But they didn’t; for a split second we locked eyes, Ms. McDonnell and I, a ‘pregnant pause’ of dramatic silence, then she looked at Alan and quietly said, “*Okay,*” and that was that.

Rolling rolling!

As soon as the verdict was read, “*Not guilty*,” and the courtroom exploded with enthusiasm, both in favor and against, I rushed towards Mary from the depths of the galley, pushing past the bar rail and everyone and everything else, into the well, and began shouting questions at her: “*Ms. Langworthy! How does it feel? Did the verdict surprise you? What’s next? A civil suit? Comment, please!*” That sort of thing, as she tried to exit the courtroom and ignore the questions, while big Steve tried to physically block me. Fortunately, I was able to get around him because he couldn’t move as large a hulking mass as he carried as fast as the sure-footed, intrepid *bigrobtheactor*. Anyway, it was a riot. We shot it like four or five times. I delivered each time, ‘*killing it*’ (as we peace-loving Americans like to say), and at Alan’s direction, getting even ‘bigger’ (more expressive) with each take. All eyes were on me, with everyone—maybe fifty or sixty people watching and working, reacting, hanging on my every word and action. It was an incredible rush, going from the minor, slight attention of an ‘extra’ to having all eyes on me as a principal. By the time Alan called “Cut!” on the final take, everybody, now including Emma, who was imitating me by repeating my lines, was hysterical, because I went just about over the top, yelling, “*The people have a right to know! The people demand to know!*” Even on the final take

(at Alan's direction), I banged Emma off balance in my unleashed exuberance to rush forward and get a quote from 'Langworthy' who continued stonewalling but couldn't quite shake me as they eventually made their way out of the courtroom. Not even a "*No comment*," which felt weird, but even so, it was great. A peak moment, a breakthrough—net effect: I wasn't a wannabe; I could do it, even under pressure like that, and with top-tier performers. Yes, I stepped up when I had my shot and slammed it out of the park. After that night, I knew—not just believed, not just imagined, or hoped, but knew—that this 'historic' milestone would be added to the record, with SAG, with IMDb, and with the public, enforcing the notion that it was there that I was supposed to be, dharma finally catching up with me a bit, and it was there, in that industry where I was gonna leave those next marks.

Live! From Buffalo, New York to Rockefeller Center, New York City, it's a bigrobtheactor TV-set meltdown!

Of course, even in that rarified venue, and my radically redirected life course, though most were, not all the marks left were praiseworthy. Some were still reminiscent of Kabbo, in his explosive temper and its collateral damage, but never randomly inspired. There was always a reasonable *casus belli*, meaning only after repeated and ample provocation, even

occasionally on professional film sets. Like the rings of a growing tree, nothing ever really goes away; they may fade with time, past personas may be superseded, layered over and expanded upon, but they don't disappear. This particular mark was left in the NBC studio of Saturday Night Live during my second gig as B/G on that iconic stage. Before getting to it and for added context, there was an earlier instance of stifled rage held over. So, let's return to the final few weeks and days at the upstate penitentiary, two decades before. Though long and weathered, it seems the threads connect.

Glen, the second rate alpha dog, and I were playing a slap-fight 'game.' Before describing the memory let me just say, the story is incomplete, there are gaps and as I retell it, there are inconsistencies. I'm acknowledging that right away, it's the best I can do, but I'm certain it covers the gist. He was locked in his cell, probably another penalty like mine with the window, a sentence for some infraction of the rules. His cell was at the end of the tier, down by the TV which no one was watching, so no one else was around at the time, the other inmates were busy playing cards, writing letters or doing pushups, whatever we do while serving time in a cage, so it was just me and him. The game, or contest, can be played two ways. Generally, the two opponents face each other from less than an arms length away. One party holds his hands extended forward in front of him, pressed flat against each other, palms touching while the second party holds his arms and hands behind his back. The game is to quickly slap the extended

hands with a sudden swing. If you hit? You hit. The opponent feels the sting, growing more intense with each blow. The swinger may fake a move, and if the other guy flinches, separates his hands, the swinger guy gets a free slap. On the other hand, pardon the pun, if the thrown slap is missed, i.e., the guy with hands extended is able to pull away after the swing is on its way (not a fake) then the roles reverse. It's payback time. Sounds like fun? The other way, the way we were playing is that both hands are extended, the first guy's palms up in front of him, the second guy rests his hands on top of them, palms down on top of the first guy's. In this version the guy on the bottom tries flipping his hands around and slapping the top hands so quickly that the second guy can't get away fast enough. Same drill, a fake out is free slap, and full on slap is just that, a delivered smack. If he misses, top hands guy pulls away fast enough after the launch, the roles reverse. Because Glen was locked in, we could only play the latter. Standing close to the cell bars, at one point (here's where it gets vague), in frustration after repeated misses, he slaps my face with a rubber slipper. How he got a rubber slipper in his hands, and how he got it outside the cell's bars quickly enough to hit me with, I don't recall, but I'm pretty sure that's what happened. Anyway, that ended the game because I walked away. "*Okay, Glen,*" and let it go with that. Luckily, since he was locked in, there was really no other option, because had he not been, I would have been forced to go at him, and most likely, outweighed by at least forty to fifty pounds, most

likely would have ended up in worse shape than Prince. Now, the thing about that, aside from the likelihood of severe injury or a possible additional charge, was the even more likely prospect of getting ‘*trademarked*’, i.e., visibly bruised. It was only a matter of a week or less before I’d be shipped back down to Nassau County, and then only days after release back to ‘the streets’, time served.

Aside from staying alive, my main goal was to walk out of that jail in the same, or better shape than when I walked in eight months before. I wanted all my lady friends and neighbors to see me come out healthy, in one piece and ready for action again, not limping, broken or otherwise bruised up. That was more important to me than practically anything else at the time of the slap, so even when he was released a day or two later, instead of going after him, I laid low (“in the cut”, as if waiting for the right opportunity to strike) and counted the days, minutes and hours before going home to my mother, sister, grandmother, buddies and full roster of waiting young honeys, and back to my aborted Arkay Trucking career. Call it pride, call it vanity, call it self-preservation, call it whatever, but this was the operating directive. Somehow though, word got out. In the yard a day or two later, one of the older, bigger and more seasoned jailhouse white guys from another tier turned to me and quietly said: “*I’d’a gone up on him.*” So he knew, as did probably almost everyone else on the floor, maybe even the whole block. Why? Because Glen was black and I was white, that meant it wasn’t just about me or him, the

two individuals, it was about the races. Incidents like that start race wars in the joint so it rarely happens. But now it did, and I was at the center of it, letting my 'race' down. Had it been an actual state prison and not a county lockup housed in a state prison, it most likely would have. The dude was letting me know that, the implication being, they had my back, I wasn't alone. No one came to Prince's aid, it was black on black, no one came to my aid back in the county at sixteen when I got my head stomped, it was white on white, but this was different. Mazal tov to me.

It wasn't even the second time up there that the spotlight shone on me, the first being the window-breaking rampage. The second time was also in the yard, where I met Josh Small. I noticed the guy before, a pale-skinned and wiry white guy with bushy dark hair, a few years older than me. I noticed him because both his hands were visibly swollen, and that face, those dark, sunken eyes, looked somehow oddly familiar. Once we got to talking, it turned out that not only was he from Nassau County too, but his sister, Lisa, who bore a striking family resemblance to Josh, was my yeshiva school classmate. Unbelievable, right? That tiny little thing, his sister was a cutie, so of course, her pretty face and name stuck. 'Small' world, huh? He was up there on a burglary charge, and his hands were swollen from all the dope he shot into them, supported in part by his amateur burglary career.

Once we got past that discovery, he confided to me a plan he had for getting back down to the County where he could get his visits again. Not many county inmates were getting visits from almost 400 miles away. I had no such wish, though I was getting plenty of visits down there and appreciated them, it didn't matter much to me there and then, it wasn't even on my list. Once down there I even got set up to meet a hot, young Italian babe from the Five Towns who was drawn to bad boys by a one-time tier mate, Tulio, a real Italian from the other side, now a low-level 'associate' taking a possession of stolen goods fall for the higher ups, for visits. Even with that I wouldn't for a second ever have even contemplated trading the current lock up for visits down there. Who needs visits anyway? Maybe one of those college girls I put my fist through the window for might show up, but that was unlikely and definitely represented the extent of my efforts. That place, NCCC, a 'triple A maximum' joint of cinder block, shatterproof glass, and steel, was a suffocating nightmare compared to doing time up here. I just wanted the term to pass quickly, as uneventfully as possible and to get the hell out, and as I said, of course, in the same shape or better as I went in. That was all I cared about. Not Glenn, not visits, not Josh's plan, not anything else. But I agreed to go along with him; he was a homie, in its truest sense, and it wouldn't mean I'd have to go with him if his plan succeeded, even after adding my name to the effort, so why not? I didn't have to hide my faith from anybody, not from the king of England and certainly not

here. It was between me and my Maker, all of our Makers, not the inmates in the Erie Country yard. That was my attitude.

His plan was to formally insist, in writing, on Jewish services for Friday nights, the Sabbath. His thinking was that since they didn't have a resident rabbi up there in Erie County, they'd have to honor his request by shipping him back downstate where there were plenty of rabbi/chaplains available, and then he could have his visits. Okay. No harm in that, right? So I told him he could add my name.

The following late Friday afternoon out on the yard, a call came over the loudspeaker system: "*Jewish services. Jewish services in the chapel at eighteen hundred hours. On the gate!*" Once we heard that, we marched, just the two of us in front of hundreds of guys, from the far side of the yard right past all the other criminals, convicts, and clowns to the 'gate' where we were let in and directed down the hall to the chapel. There, the rabbi from Sing Sing (Ossining) met us and conducted the perfunctory ceremony, leading us in prayer, the recognition, and sanctification of the Creator's day of rest, even a grape juice '*kiddush*'. That was a stroll I'll never forget. Honestly? If there was any Judeaphobic bigotry floating around, and there must have been at least some, it never manifested. If anything, I imagine we looked pretty cool being called out special like that, y'know, God's 'chosen' people and all, even us heathen, jailbirds, junkies and twisted

jokers, but not quite special enough to get Josh back down to Nassau County.

In summary, my yard fame, the term in the can, and poor Josh's life were on the downward bend. I would soon be released, intact as desired and against the odds, actually in better shape than when I entered. After eight months of drying out, with no booze for all that time, push-up pumped and sit-up tight, I was now focused forward and filled with newfound optimism and strength. Tragically enough, my short-lived buddy, and brother of my classmate, as later told to me by Lisa, he never made it beyond a few more years on this earth, if that long. God rest his soul because he got little or none here. May his memory be a warning.

Speaking of which, rest, that slap with the slipper, and the "*I'd'a gone up against him*" comment kept me from all the deeper rest I might have otherwise deserved for quite a long time, which brings me to SNL and Rockefeller Center so many years later.

Before 9.11

To get on *Saturday Night Live* as background, the first step is to register with their background casting person to let him or her know you're alive, interested, and available. To do this, one needs to know who they are and how to reach out to them. You don't get this information in the Goldman Sachs

boardroom or the local laundromat. It's either by word of mouth, the Ross Reports, or better still in this case, there is an excellent outfit located in the Film Center building just on the edge of Hell's Kitchen called Actors Connection. There, for a reasonable fee, and available on a subscription basis or at a single event rate, approximately twenty-five dollars a pop, an actor can 'connect' with one or as many as he chooses, active, busy, and real players in the industry who have the capacity to cast and hire actors. The connection is centered around either a class, a seminar, a workshop, or a one-on-meeting with, for example, Saturday Night Live's extras casting boss. The meetings usually consisted of a live demonstration of one's talents, look, and abilities, say, like performing a monologue, doing some type of dramatic exercise, or working through a one or more character scene study. You hand them your headshot and resume; they hand you a script and a scene partner if needed and about fifteen minutes to prepare. Then, you do your thing in front of them; they give you feedback, maybe do a second run-through, and the connection's been made. This way, when you reach out again, usually by postcard, they already know who you are and where you might fit and that you are serious. That's probably how I got on this guy's radar, so after the umpteenth postcard in as many months, he gave me a call: was I available for rehearsal on Thursday, dress rehearsal on Friday, another on Saturday afternoon followed by two live performances on Saturday night, the first in front of only a studio audience, and the

second, in front of another studio audience and live on national TV? That's how they do it, two back-to-back shows in front of a live studio audience. The off-air is from 8 to 10 pm, a two-hour show with all the sketches and musical acts, then the second at eleven thirty, now live on national television for a second studio audience, but they pare it down to an hour and a half. This is not a SAG gig; there's another union, the *American Federation of Television and Radio Artists* known as AFTRA that had jurisdiction there, a union I wanted no part of mainly because anyone could buy their way in simply by paying an admission fee and subsequent dues. Think: the great Groucho's line about not wanting to join any club that would have me, or anyone else (so indiscriminately) as a member. But there they are, no way around them, and SNL is their turf. That meant that non-members could work it and get the same pay as members but only twice, after which, they become a "must-join," meaning if they wanted to continue working they need to pony up the substantial initial dues, somewhere in the same vicinity of SAG's, about twelve hundred bucks. Since the call came in, it would have only been my first gig, so there were no issues with that union, and of course, they kept a record; it's their 'bread and butter', but either way, this was like a dream, "*Live, from New York, it's...*" so believe me, I was plenty psyched.

The sketch they hired me for was a talk-show parody satirizing the newly emerging violent, off-the-charts mayhem of the latest iteration of the genre, where the show's guests,

like on Morton Downey Jr. or later Jerry Springer, would physically attack each other over an issue the show's topic was centered on—usually something socially controversial or something else deeply personal. Incidentally, I had been a guest on one of these real shows, an early Morton Downey Jr. show featuring none other than the infamous Lyndon LaRouche and my fearless leader for the event, the president and founder of the now-defunct ('B' roll) Jewish Defense Organization, the entropical successor to the late, great rabbi's ('A' roll) Jewish Defense League, Mordechai Levy. My presence on the show served basically as a prop for him, in my dark sunglasses, black beret, and matching leather jacket, while also having no idea what I was getting myself into when he called me the afternoon of that day to invite me onboard. All he said was that we'd be picked up by a limo near Times Square and driven about twenty minutes away to a TV studio near the Meadowlands in Jersey, then returned, and it would be wild. Indeed it was. By the third segment, it had descended into a chaotic melee and three-ring circus complete with surprise guests, audience plants, chairs thrown across the room, and piercing off-camera whistle alarms as studio security rushed in from both directions to try (unsuccessfully) to calm things down, so I was no stranger to the style of these loony, fun, Paddy Chayefsky-like programs.

Another anecdote worth recalling was the time, not long before or after the three-ring-circus Morton Downey extravaganza, the two of us flew from LaGuardia to Buffalo,

to a SUNY school up there where Louis Farrakhan and his merry Islamic pranksters were scheduled to give a speech to the student body. Our quest was to lead the protest against him.

Once we landed at the airport up there, as we exited the terminal, we were met by a contingent of local reporters and at least a half dozen plainclothes local PD. They were there to make sure we didn't have any weapons or use any that might have been planted somewhere on the scene waiting for us. That made the whole escapade a lot more thrilling than it even was, and, as a bonus, the squad, never leaving us, served as our security force. Because they were watching us, by default they were protecting us. It was like having a professional, armed security detail of our own.

With that enhanced security, I assumed the bravado to go toe-to-toe with a dozen or more members of the Fruit of Islam (his security) outside the venue, challenging their beliefs and words. Without those cops there? I probably wouldn't have dared; the L-rd working in his usual mysterious ways, I suppose. The Fruity guys didn't know they were cops surrounding us, so they must've thought us relatively diminutive Jewish guys were either crazy, bluffing, or just plain foolish, or maybe even had something up our sleeves they didn't want to find out about. Anyway, it worked, and we made our point while I had a blast playing radical to the real McCoys.

Back in TV Land

The SNL version was hosted by Tracey Morgan and a guest list of half-a-dozen ‘white supremacist skinhead’ types facing off against a similar number of ‘black nationalist’ types, but the punchline is both get attacked by a frustrated, bat-wielding Morgan—that was the joke. Okay, not too funny, but not boring either and definitely as much fun as the real thing, maybe more, so I told everyone this side of Jupiter, to watch for me on this week’s SNL program and to keep an eye out for that sketch. Yes, I was super psyched and made a big, big deal out of it, including to everyone I was still in touch with from school where I had graduated (‘cum laude’, just to prove the point about rehabilitating myself), only a year or so before.

Came that Thursday afternoon, arriving at 30 Rockefeller Center, checked in by name at the security desk before taking the elevator to the eighth-floor studio, emerging into the main hallway that leads to the theater, stage, dressing, and holding rooms. Again, the surreality setting in, walking past and under the oversized mounted black and white posters of the original *Not Ready For Prime Time Players* — the ground-breaking greats: Belushi, Aykroyd, Chase, Radner, Curtin, Morris, Murray, and Newman was thrilling. Indeed, I was following in their wake. Never in my wildest imaginings, swinging that mop on the ‘floor crew’ back at TOPIC House (Volume I), watching that second season, did I think I’d ever be a part of

that scene, but here I was. It felt as if they, or their ghosts, were right there watching us enter, and could hear them wishing us luck, ‘break legs!’ There was Garret Morris perched on top of the craft table appraising us as the Wicked Witch’s flying monkey, and Belushi’s famous battle cry “*Cheeseburger! Cheeseburger!*” along with Aykroyd mumbling something incoherent about all us “*ignorant sluts.*” Huh? Who? To which Emily Litella added her standard, laconic, skit ending “*Nevermind.*”

Everything was going fine. Thursday’s rehearsal was smooth; it was easy. On cue, we jumped up ready to rumble against each other, five or six guys on each side, but were suddenly interrupted by an enraged Morgan and the surprise appearance of a baseball bat hidden by his desk, causing us all to abruptly flee as he gave chase, the skit’s punchline. Same with the dress rehearsals, easy, one on Friday and a second on Saturday afternoon before the two shows. The night of the show, the entire background cast for every sketch that needed them, probably forty or more actors, sat in the designated holding area with its own smaller stage, just off the main hall only a few steps from the main theater and stage, again, doing crossword puzzles, preparing for auditions, chit-chatting with colleagues, whatever, i.e., standing by. Right after each skit is called to set over the speaker placed on the upside corner of the inner wall, they announce who’s on deck, up next, so everyone has time to prepare. You don’t know when, or even if your skit is going to make it onto the second performance,

the one on live TV, but you need to be ready as if it's on. While the current skit is being performed, strategically placed red lights covering the entire floor turn on, alerting everyone that the sounds are being picked up, so keep as quiet as possible until the light turns back off, same as with every sound stage setup, even without live studio audiences. Naturally, all the skits are performed for the first performance, but whether yours makes it past the cuts or not is unknown until literally the last minute, the last skit of the second show, so you sit there on edge, red light on or red light off, hoping, praying it will be called. Well? Ours was cut. That was disappointing, and I had to explain to everyone east of Mars what happened, or why it didn't happen. Anyway, we still get paid in full, so, aside from the letdown, no harm done. What're you gonna do about it anyway? That's showbiz. The next week, surprise, surprise, I got called again. They were aiming to fit the skit into this week's broadcast so we'd all be needed again. Great! Another shot, so I repeated my announcement, including the appropriate caveat, and everyone took note. All eyes on the small screen come eleven-thirty on Saturday night, only to be disappointed a second time. Same thing, once again never making it to the live show. Dammit. But okay. Whatever. It's showbiz again.

After 9.11

Let's say just over a year later, they call again. Why it had been so long between calls, I haven't a clue. It was clear though that I hadn't quite worked my way in as one of the elite steady crew yet—the unflappable sycophants who worked nearly every week and got all the breaks as they might come up, including one or two employees of Actors Connection: a featured shot here, maybe a line or two there (an 'under five' as in under five lines, an AFTRA thing), for which there was added pay and a possible chance of the elusive upgrade, perhaps even be 'discovered'. No, not me, not yet, but here again was another call, another shot, another gig, and another check. Nothing bad about that. But times had surely changed, and not all for the good.

It was only a few short weeks after the horrific attacks on American soil; they didn't even tape for a couple of weeks after, so this was one of the first since they picked up again. New York was shaken, photos of the lost and missing plastered over windows and walls all over the entire island, missing parents, children, loves ones and friends. It was like a piece of my childhood was ripped out and crushed; as a kid, I watched them build those towers, so I had to do something, anything I could get the folks running the action would allow me—anything. I would've flown an F16 if they gave me the keys.

That morning, a Tuesday, a pal of mine and I mustered outside my building, the West Side Y where I had been dorming since

the second year at John Jay but remained after they added a Residence over the west wing of the architectural landmark, and began walking down there from 63rd street, but were stopped by uniformed men with guns on 23rd, so that was a no-go. By Friday, I figured out how. I got on that massive line outside the Manhattan Red Cross headquarters, along with thousands of other volunteers who showed up from all over the country where I just kept saying “Yes”, to whatever they asked me: “*Can you speak a foreign language?*” “*Can you drive?*” “*Can you read a map?*” “*Swim?*” “*Launch a Tomahawk?*” ‘*Yes. Yes. I can*’ or ‘*yes, I will*’. The keyword, as it often is, was ‘yes’.

That’s how I got down there on that ferry boat docked on the Chambers Street pier, footsteps from ‘the pit’—still smoke and fire, still a ‘rescue mission’—where I saw Melissa Gilbert and Richard Masur, the former and current union president of the Screen Actors Guild make guest appearances, but I didn’t bother greeting them. It was good seeing them there, representation, but it wasn’t a social call, and I was in no mood to suck up. So, I was down there at “*Ground Zero*” with the Red Cross volunteering, doing what I could—mostly boat maintenance as the rescue workers dug and the guys with big guns stood guard, the poisonous white smoke still rising in ferocious plumes from the crater.

If those reverberations weren’t enough to cause chaos and anxiety on every New York film or TV set, envelopes

containing anthrax were being sent across the country targeting media and political figures, among them to Tom Brokaw, the NBC Nightly News anchor just a few floors below us, which no one had claimed responsibility or been caught for. So, to say the atmosphere was 'tense' is no overstatement. Everyone seemed to be riding an ocean of excess adrenaline, feeling the visceral uncertainty of each moment, as if the next might just be the last, all that tension surrounding and running through me while rehearsing the scene I was hired to help perform.

After a trip to the second “intifada”



Yafo (Jafa) Daled, August 2001

Compounding all that, as if there hadn't been enough drama, a week or so just before the attacks, I had just returned from volunteering in Israel for a month with their civil guard during a spate of murderous bombings targeting civilians during the so-called "2nd intifada," the coward's go-to weapon of choice. There, along with another standup American Hebrew, a crew-cutted New York talent manager and US army vet, Bruce Kendo, we were assigned to a *mishmar eizrachi* base in Jaffa. After 'qualifying' on a rifle range, we were armed, stood guard at roadside checkpoints, boarded local passenger buses, and joined foot patrols with the regular team. Though it was mostly 'eye-wash' security, meaning primarily intended to give visual comfort to an unarmed but determined public, the danger was quite real, as was the accompanying tension. All in all, it had been an eventful couple of months.

Anyhow, once the call came in, I was psyched again. Only this time, things would end up differently, and not in a happy way. The first difference was the skit. As cool as the earlier one was, or might have been, this one was dull, and not at all in keeping with whatever talent I may have had on hand to offer. Still, it was a gig, and I had to take'm as they came. The sketch had something to do with going through airline security, standing in line to file past a metal detector (yeah, this time I left my weapons in Jaffa), and that was about it. I don't remember the context, and that's probably because it was forgettable, especially in light of the drama that ensued. It was just after Friday's rehearsal when as we lined up to sign

out, about twenty of us background actors, one of the PAs called my name.

“Robert Kabakoff. Robert Kabakoff. Phone call for you.”

Huh? What? Who on earth even knows I’m here, let alone wants to speak with me? So I stepped out of line and took the receiver from her extended hand.

“Robert Kabakoff?” asked the male voice on the other end.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“This is the AFTRA rep for SNL,” (gives his name). *“Have you worked this set before?”*

Now, I’m thinking to play coy, hesitant to talk with a stranger on the phone, and I don't know exactly what this is about.

“I’m not sure,” I replied.

Then, he reads me my Social Security number and asks, *“Is that your number?”*

“Yes. It is.”

“Yeah, well, we have you down as a ‘must-join’. You worked SNL twice before. That means if you want to work this weekend, it’s time to join up. The initiation dues are \$1,200, and we need it before the show tapes live, but don’t worry, you can pay half up front and the other in the next two calendar quarters until it’s paid in full. I’ll be by on Saturday night to pick up the first payment. Got it? Okay. What do you want to do?”

Now, I’m thinking to go along with it and see how it plays out before I hand over anything. The pay from the entire weekend gig, all rehearsals and the two performances, whether they make it on to the final broadcast or not, was only about \$160, so, we’re talking an up-front investment of twelve hundred bucks, not chump change. It might take years at this rate to just break even, and right away I’d be an AFTRA member with regular dues to pay on top of the initiation. Needless to say, my enthusiasm, especially in the wake of the 9/11 tremors, was waning, and the accompanying tension, and now

in the wake of that phone call, waxing. It felt like a shakedown. Why didn't we have this conversation before I accepted the gig in the first place, then showed up for this second rehearsal? Why not tell me that when casting called about the gig? *"Oh, by the way, you're a must-join."* I was already invested to the tune of two afternoons' work. But, needing to respond right away, I figured to take it one step at a time, so I answered: *"Okay. See you Saturday."* and handed her back the phone.

Fast forward to Saturday night, it's the early show and I'm on line with the rest of sycophants doing our skit in front of the live in-house audience. In line in front of me, and by this time I could see the pecking order, was one of the chief, possibly number one background actors, a slightly cross-eyed, overweight, dark-skinned, black guy in his thirties. I hadn't had any interaction with him other than during these rehearsals but he seemed like an amicable enough fellow. I mean, it's a comedy show, so out of boredom and my then sense of humor, I started to quietly sing whatever the band happened to be playing right into his ear as we waited to pass through the metal detectors. By the way, the house band was smoking hot, so it was an impulse I just chose to go with, trying to relieve some of all the post 9/11 stress. Big mistake. He immediately turns around with a raging hate look on his face that at first I thought might be a part of his improvised

response, because anything else would have been severely disproportionate to the one or two seconds of my attempt to liven things up in an otherwise dull skit. Once I saw he was serious, I quickly and quietly apologized, “*Sorry, man.*” With that, he turns back around and the skit ends. Okay. No harm done so far.

Next thing you know, minutes later, we’re all outside at the craft table in the main hallway just outside the stage and holding area when he confronts me again. He’s still livid. It was strange because I already apologized, what else did he want? He’s now inches from my face berating me for my ‘unprofessionalism’ etc., and I’m backing up. We’re in the midst of a crowd of plain clothes cops working security, production people, audience members milling about, and the rest of the background cast where the confrontation is now getting everyone’s attention, but no one’s budging. No one’s moving in to separate us or even trying to verbally calm him down, like they’re enjoying the drama unfolding in front of them more than the stage show, and I just keep backing up, apologizing, suppressing the impulse to swing as he’s in perfect range but I know if I do, they’ll take me out of there in handcuffs, it’ll be all on me, so if there’s gonna be a scrap, I’m gonna have to let *fatboy* make the first move, which is also a bad idea. If he was white, it would’ve been a whole different confrontation, far fewer constraints, as there had been in other cases, but he wasn’t and I’m running out of space to back up into, less than an inch from the wall now so I dodged around

and past him headed into the extra's holding room filled with the rest of the background cast waiting for their scenes to be called. Once in there I grabbed the closest seat in the front row, took a breath and began to settle myself. A minute or two later, for some reason I turned to look behind me, up towards the slightly elevated rear of the room, past the twenty or more rows of seats filled with actors biding their time with chit chat and crossword puzzles, and what do I see? Mr. Sensitive and an older, taller, gray-haired, white dude dressed in a gaudy, bright leisure suit. Fatboy's all over that guy too, and I can see he's complaining about me, pointing and animated like I had been trying to eat his children, and now they're both looking back down at me, at which point I realized who the white dude was. Guess. That's right, the AFTRA rep who came to take my money. That's when the dam broke. Without thinking, I started shouting: "*I gave you a chance in the hallway. What're you gonna do? Do something! I gave you a chance! I gave you a chance! What are you gonna do? What are you gonna do now? **You half-homeless motherfucker!***" And with those shattering words the entire room lets out an audible gasp. I was so loud you could hear me in the main theater where it briefly interrupted the flow of the show, someone nearby was having a major meltdown. Where that particular phrase came from is not clear, but something tells me it was from Glen, and that humiliating slap with the rubber slipper being the last time I ever had a beef with a brother. It was the rage I held back then so I could leave that joint looking sharp

and intact, but now, and possibly because of the common skin color, combined with his attempted intimidation and success in shaming me in front of the entire hallway of onlookers, who made no move to intervene, him probably thinking I'm just another limp-wristed, faggot actor sauntering through the hallowed corridors of SNL, that it had now arrived. *A half-homeless motherfucker.* Fuck him and fuck the show too. If this is the end, I'm not gonna go out taking shit from anybody, especially not from big-mouthed nobodies held together by inflated egos. No. Not me. I could then see the now stunned look on Mr. Sensitive's face, who hadn't realized he was playing hopscotch in a minefield, and that rep guy? As soon as I recognized him for who he was, I blocked him out, never even looked at him again. Fuck him too. I wasn't gonna give that AFTRA goon shit. I had brought my checkbook, just in case I decided for some reason to ante up, but that was just settled. Fuck that AFTRA racket. I don't give a shit. If I have to swallow shit like I did up in Buffalo? I'm gonna puke it back out all over you, or the next clown close enough like I just did down here.

Once I began settling down again, taking a seat for a second time, the almost full room was nearly silent, an ominous silence, again, like on the M.C. Fox, I had just about started a race-riot in the eyes of ubiquitous racialists, but I just sat there, trying to relax myself, and waited to see what would happen next. What happened next, maybe five minutes later, was a tap on my shoulder from behind. Looking up, I saw it

was two of the plainclothes cops. They told me they were instructed to escort me from the building, and I could see by their slight hesitation they were preparing to be abused by me in another act of unhinged defiance, but I was done, pressure released and I had no more desire to be there. None. I had already slipped a note under the dressing room door of funny-lady Cheri Oteri advising her and her big ass of my interest, and I wasn't writing anybody a fucking check, and the skit sucked, so I looked up at them and calmly said, "*Fine. Let's go,*" gathered my gear, and walked out of there with not much more than this story to tell. But it's a good one. Right? Funny thing though, about two weeks later, when the check came, I was paid in full, and I never had to join that wretched, shady, shakedown racket outfit called AFTRA.

Chapter VII: *The fall*

Maybe not quite Lucifer's fall from the heavens, but definitely a precipitous drop. Without going into details that would compromise the foundational principle of anonymity, both for myself and the others involved, I'll do the best I can to explain what happened that brought me once again to the edge of gun-toting, looney tunes madness a decade before the SNL meltdown, and perhaps make clear what *playing hopscotch in a minefield* meant.

It's 1990, or thereabouts, and my Arkay Trucking empire is purring in full throttle, having begun with \$12 deliveries of plumbing supplies to dusty construction sites in the early '80s to \$20,000 deliveries across multiple states with the furnishings and treasures to millionaires' castles by the late ones. I'm living in a top-floor studio apartment in leafy Woodmere, Long Island, housing many of my own treasures, among them family heirlooms like my baby grand Knabe, a gift from Mom-Mom. From there, I'm employing people, including a weekly house cleaner, a laundry service, auto and truck mechanics, and of course, my hired hands on the truck. I swear to Odin, it even seemed as if a few of my wealthier

customers were actually looking for ways to give me business. One guy, whose family owned a very well-known drugstore, the entire chain, gave me some of his older furniture to store for him which brought me a monthly check. Another designer's client did the same, a one-of-a-kind dining table with a thick glass top and another monthly check, which I stored in my apartment building basement and gave a cut to the super, so it was my customary win/win/win operation across the board. The business is rolling along so successfully and enjoyably. Word got out in my circles, such that guys in need came to me for employment—a healthy day's pay here, another there. Good people I liked, enjoyed working with, and respected. I was proud and pleased to be able to help out by creating more win/win relationships. Life was pretty good. I'm the man, driving a beautiful BMW coupe painted the perfect aftermarket slate-gray that I paid too much for, but it hardly mattered. I also had a fully customized Honda 650 and my handsome white F350 box truck. No debt, plane tickets to Israel, Italy, and Asia, and weekends away with my way-too-hot-for-me, sweet, nineteen-year-old former Catholic school cheerleader girlfriend, Jane, in Montauk and Vermont. I even had her move in with me for a spell, but only for a few months before sending her back to her parents, from whom she'd run away from home before I picked her up one night, stealing her away from her then-active US Navy, body-building boyfriend who she lived with in a trailer in the

Vermont woods. To them, because she returned home to them, I was some sort of hero.

The fall was uncalled for, caused by what I think of as bad ‘programming’ stemming in part from the remaining residue of my father’s curse (see Volume I), but mainly due to the collapse of my role model, highlighting an unhealthy psychological reliance on a cult of well-wishers who promised not only recovery from John Barleycorn-soaked madness but also a “*spiritual awakening*” that would lead to a “*life beyond your wildest dreams*” — the carrot, but also a stick, a big one: stick close to us or suffer the consequences — jail, death, or madness. They emphasized remaining “*as willing to listen as the dying can be*”, continually repeating it as an unassailable maxim, so you would be “*returned to sanity*” for a lifetime. That’s all I’m going to say about that directly, aside from the fact that within the two polarities, towards the end of my nearly decade-long first term, were two primary relationships that anchored me in that world of the chronically ‘*recovering*’ and seemingly sane.

The first, the ‘role model,’ was an older brother type, an intensely cerebral M.D., a brown-eyed, husky Hebe and renaissance man in his late thirties named Stanley, who drove my dream car, a Corvette, and took me under his wing after my emerging from the county lockup in '83, 'sponsoring' me into that community. Together, we spent hours in his

ranch-style home on a tree-covered spread that included a built-in swimming pool, watching his giant screen TV while enjoying conversations over near-nightly feasts cooked up in his kitchen or taken out from a variety of our favorite local eateries. The Brown graduate, with a huge 'Big Brother is watching' style self-portrait painted in dark-toned oils mounted just over the bow of his own baby grand, seemed to know everything about almost everything, and what he might not have known hardly mattered. Stan's arrogance, easily mistaken by an anxious neophyte as confidence, was reflected by the image's grim expression. He knew all about '*recovery*' and how to achieve and maintain it, and his life seemed to bear it out, approaching the apex of his career, including his pending second marriage to a beautiful, bosomy, blond-haired nurse from a prominent local family who adored him beyond question.

The second was the down-on-his-luck son of a *cosa nostra* capo who died in disgrace due to his alleged breaking of 'omertà', leaving the son without connections, no more proforma, set-up JFK truck hijacking gigs, leaving him essentially friendless except for his stalwart girlfriend but otherwise empty-handed, save for a crippling cocaine and booze addiction he carried on his back into his early thirties. He then came to me as I came to the doctor, looking for help getting back on his feet, or as the great Dylan phrased, *shelter from the storm*, so I took him under my still strong wing.

The doctor lost his license after pleading guilty to narcotics charges for writing himself prescriptions and getting caught at it, a collapse of his own that began at least a year before my fall, meanwhile still playing the role of mentor while the truth remained unknown to me until much later, shortly before mine. Despite his legal and addiction woes, and helping him cover up, he remained solvent for much of his tribulation. Meanwhile, just about the same time as his concealed and catastrophic professional and personal plummet, the wiseguy's son arrived on the scene, joining our 'club', and needed work. When he chose me as his 'touchstone' and guide, he came not only looking for 'spiritual' support, friendship, and 'recovery' but also hoping for a gig. There seemed to be a natural and timely fit, despite the informal prohibition dictated by our society's ethics and practices. After all, I had hired our guys right out of the Salvation Army, dudes moonlighting from day jobs, the MTA, NYPD, Department of Corrections, more win/win situations, so why not a former *cosa nostra* associate in need? Especially a talented one. According to our society's protocols, that was a no-no, as it would make the sponsor/sponsee relationship unkosher, likely to dilute and distract from its main, all-important function. In accord with that, for over a year, it was another classic win/win. He was simply a hanger-arounder companion on some of my Arkay Trucking rides, where we spoke in great detail, pouring our life histories out to one another, triumphs and failures, good times and bad, all the time bolstering each other's fortitude

and commitment to remain drug and alcohol-free, but nothing of much substance more.

Sometime into the early second year of our friendship, I got a couple of big—very big—trucking jobs, two of the three twenty-thousand-dollar gigs, and was just a bit in over my head, experience and equipment-wise, so I needed all the qualified assistance I could find. It was another stress, a big one, but I was determined to grab the opportunities and do my best to make them successes, another huge rung on the way up to trucking superstardom.

One afternoon as we were driving around Greenwich Village, I stepped out to make a pickup, leaving him waiting in the running truck in case it had to be moved. When I returned and got back in, carrying an expensive bronze statuette that needed to be wrapped and stored, I handed it to him and out of basic practicality asked, “*Hey Rocco, can you do me a favor and handle this for me while I drive?*” With that, he takes it from me and goes straight to work wrapping it up then cushioning it between heavier objects unlikely to shift in transit. I saw right away the skill in his hands, and his intention, the focus and capability, like it was the most important thing he ever had to do, that the prep-school articulate and broad-shouldered gentleman could be a very significant asset, and I needed that help.

At the close of the ride that day, once we got back to Woodmere, right before dropping him off and heading home, just as he climbed down from the seat to close the passenger door, I turned to him, smiled and said, “*Grazie, paisano,*” then handed him a twenty. That exchange changed the dynamic; I was now his boss. Not only was he physically capable, this golden crucifix-wearing, jet-black-haired, and blue-eyed bull, fit to help carry an expensive sofa up multiple flights of stairs without any damage and wrap up and secure expensive, even delicate artwork, but he might even be able please my steady customers, putting them at ease in my absence while foremaning a crew of hand-picked Arkay Trucking delivery men in my absence. Taken all together, it was another timely offer I couldn’t refuse.

As it turned out, my hard-earned and carefully cultivated customers did like him—a no-go moving forward and upward without that, the *sine qua non*, as we say in trucking. Being great at getting people to like and trust you, rely on you, being comfortable doing business with you, especially when replacing me, Mr. Arkay Trucking Personal Magnetism himself, was the key, critical asset. Everyone I ever hired could show up on time to handle expensive furniture and assorted personal property without damaging it, but anything beyond that is a much tougher find, especially for a freelance operation. But here he was, I could send him out on his own, or with a helper or crew of his own to manage for me, i.e., a

very big deal. In part because he came from the traditional second or third generation *cosa nostra* mold, sent to private school, his mother wanting him to be a surgeon, not a goomba, not even a capo goomba, not even a *capo-di-tutti-capi* goomba. And Rocco definitely had the hands for it, wrapping a rare and expensive statuette or stitching up a surgery incision, I saw that when he wrapped the statue, but boys will be boys, fathers and sons, so under his father's sway he rolled, the easy money, high risk, high return life. That's the thing with a lot of these 'made men' types, they can be awfully charming when it suits their purpose. Roccamore was smart, self-deprecating, courageous and capable, and yet, he remained a criminal. It must have been in his nature, maybe in his very DNA. Despite that, or because of that, the gangster's son chose to be my mentee.

Stanley, the actual doctor and second anchor, no helpless slouch by any means either, was an Ivy League alumnus, a fine artist, painter, pianist, entrepreneur, and a so-called 'recovering' dope-addict who (at least temporarily) overcame his soul-crushing weakness. He was my mentor, and yet, he too was a criminal, though not professional or committed to the fast-buck, something-for-nothing lifestyle. Somewhere, somehow, public trickery and personal deceit must have been in his nature too, despite his father being a successful, legitimate business owner and at least a semi-respectable owner of a factory of some sort. Think of our trio as links in a

chain that depend on one another for the overall strength of the system, keeping the whole process working. The fellowship itself is only as strong as the weakest link among us, since the entire 'spiritual' edifice was founded on trust and faith. Take them away, and all you have left is a self-serving charade, a mass delusion, naked emperors leading themselves and their flock into fantasy La La Land. My proverbial seven fat years of Joseph's dream, trucking, fucking, traveling, and freedom, ended soon after the doctor fell, when not too much later, after a few months of scratching my head with disappointment and disillusion, so did I, beginning at a routine dental visit when he prescribed Vicodin ES.

Once he 'fessed up to me about his fall (after keeping it to himself for more than a year while continuing to 'sponsor' me), and after months of standing by him as he attempted, but repeatedly failed to regain his footing, he would tell me he was getting straight again, even gave me the keys to his 'vet to drive while he did a stint in a rehab, but again he was lying, so it wasn't long before I walked away, then followed suit, forging my own prescriptions for Vicodin and filling them in rotated pharmacies all over the metropolitan area, from Cedarhurst to the upper east side to New Jersey. Proforma in these circumstances, I kept it hidden from my protégé too for as long as I could, almost a year, mostly out of shame mixed with concern that the same would happen to him, and just because I didn't want to let him down. I mean, especially

given his lineage, so, who knows? Rocco was also quite capable of driving off a cliff.

One time while we were driving to the city for the day's work, a gardening truck towing a trailer cut us off on the boulevard. It was morning rush hour, and his move was either careless or deliberately provocative, i.e., stupid — another suicide clown. I was at the wheel, so I shifted lanes to get away from and past them. There was a schedule, and stopping to fight with them would have, at the very least, cost us time, so I brushed it off and tried to let it go. They cut us off. Is that the end of the world? Is my family honor at stake? Annoying? Yes. *Casus belli*? No. If it was, I'd have been dead or locked away forever a long time before that, as would a lot of otherwise still-living and free people. You have to let most stuff go if you want to make it to old age, a lesson brought home on the last bid. Since this non-event was before my fall, I was still capable of thinking things like this through rationally and quickly. But Rocco wasn't having it. No. As soon as we came to a stop, he grabs my trusty claw hammer, tucked in alongside the driver's seat in case of a real emergency (being cut off in traffic didn't qualify), jumps out of the truck leaving the passenger door open, catches up with them, and starts pounding on their hood with it in one hand, reaching for their door handle and pulling on it with the other, until seconds later when I caught up with him, the passenger door still open, and barked out, "*C'mon. Get in. Forget it. Let's go!*" He may have been just performing

for me, but who knows? Either way, it was dangerous and unnecessary, so he was a wild card. Two wild cards, in fact, the both of us, mine just had a slower draw by then, clean and sober for nearly seven years.

Anyway, regardless of who knew what and who didn't at the time, the damage done in that fall cost me nearly everything I had in the then present or might have in the future. For example, another felony conviction and a possible career in law enforcement. What eventually happened to Rocco, the third link, I still don't know, but he ended up stealing \$100 from me using the ATM card I gave him for business expenses while I was away traveling in Israel and he was running Arkay Trucking. To my thinking, this suggested he somehow knew what was going on with me and took my silence and deceit rightfully as the betrayal it was, as Stan's was to me, and the theft was his response. With that withdrawal, combined with my collapse, the relationship ended similarly to the one with the doctor, a whimper; it just faded away. For me, it was back to awful degradation, another stay in the lockup as a guest of Ocean County, abandoning my trucking business and chic apartment, and ultimately ending up under the boardwalk in Tel Aviv with the homeless, again on felony probation, ripped to the inner seams by an open inguinal hernia, bleeding from the mouth as I spoke from teeth loosened by endless ingestions of pharmaceutical-grade narcotics — a slo-mo nightmare, like a vampire in daylight watching his reflection

fade away in the mirror. In a condition like that, once I walked away from everything and everybody, I never looked back. Arkay Trucking and my BMW ‘yuppie’ days were over. It’s a wonder things didn’t spiral to worse; the next time I opened fire there wouldn’t have been any type of warning shot, on that I’m quite confident. As it was, there was violence, and close brushes with the reaper on the way down, and while down, and even for a time on the way back up, not so long before the SNL fat boy cornered me in that hallway.

Violence before

“Once upon a (cold and lonely) midnight dreary,” a Christmas Eve, after the loss of Doctor Stan but shortly before my Vicodin binge began, in some sort of falling out with my teenage queen, I drove into the city to try and distract myself from disgruntled self-pity and solitude by attending the yearly ‘*Matzah Ball*,’ a party young Jewish singles hold that night to give us something to do while everyone else was waiting for old Saint Nick. The event was held deep in the west side of Manhattan, a nightclub space close to the river, a section of Hell’s Kitchen where nothing much else happens at night. It’s not residential; it’s strictly commercial, block after block of mostly abandoned warehouses now either totally empty or hosting nightclub venues like the one I was headed to.

Once within the vicinity, two or three blocks away and parking my two-door German stallion, I headed by foot to where the action was. From less than a block away, once the club was in sight, I observed a small crowd, maybe ten or fifteen people gathered outside in the cold winter air, just in front of the main doors opening, but something distinctly unfestive was stirring. It wasn't just the usual scene of people waiting to enter, or hanging out in front smoking weed or whatever; there was tension. Real tension that could readily be sensed from more than a block away. As I got closer, the picture got clearer. The crowd had formed a rough circle around a young male in his twenties and an older woman, probably in her forties, looking like she was still trying to fit in with the younger set, trying to hug him. Not in any kind of sensual way; more, it seemed like in a way to soothe him from some angst he was enduring. Now among the gathering, he suddenly shoves her forcefully away from him, sending her stumbling backwards for several feet into the crowd, at which point I heard a collective gasp from the stunned onlookers. What the hell was going on?

The next thing you know, she's regained her footing and goes to approach him again, only this time he shoves her with much greater force backwards again into the near-frozen onlookers. Action time. Immediately, I decided to walk past the guy casually, as if I was focused elsewhere and didn't see him, then deliberately collide my shoulder into his so I could sense

his mass and center of gravity. The dude was a few inches taller but about the same weight. A step or two after I brushed past him, I turned to circle back around to his front to approach him again, this time face to face. I'm not sure what had his attention at the moment, but it definitely wasn't me. He was probably still looking at the older gal when, as soon as I got in range, *kaPOW!* I hit him in the face with an overhand right, sending him sailing backwards to the street, his eyes already closed before he hit the ground with a hollow th-thump. I hit him so hard the onyx stone was knocked from the gold ring I wore on my right hand, a legacy gift from Jackhammer Dave (Volume II). He was out. I saw that, watched his head hit the ground and kept walking, as if it hadn't happened. After a few more steps at the same pace with which I approached him, then broke into a slow trot that quickly accelerated into a full sprint, down the block, around the corner and then into a taxi I flagged down that drove me to my parked getaway car. From there, it was back to the Island where I was afraid he might have been killed; those closed eyes, that lifeless thump. It can happen like that, just like that.

The next morning, on the news radio, I heard something about the city's murder rate for the year being broken the night before—a chilling announcement. So, I called up my trusted pal, Sergeant Paul, gave him the details, which he checked out for me, and was quite relieved to find out there was no such incident reported in that precinct, but it was close. A landmine

went off. That second shove triggered it, he pushed a lady, somebody's mother, but it could have been anything. It later on could have easily been fatboy, the humorless, cross-eyed, half-homeless motherfucker. Lucky for him, and for me, I had pretty much already recovered from the fall by the time he got in my face in the SNL hallway, but a few of the mines are still buried somewhere, that much is certain.

Watching the life I had built up over the seven years since my release from the county slowly, incrementally vanish was stressful—the fading vampire of the mirror's image. My former coping strategy, reliance on that cult, or 'fellowship' as they like to call it, if it had not directly caused the fall, then certainly it was no longer a reliable barrier to the agonizing curse of *the park bench, a shoe salesman, or death row*.

Violence during

At some point, shortly after release from the six-week bid in the Ocean County lockup, I decided to wrap up the Arkay Trucking life, sell the truck, the car, move out of my Woodmere palace, and give the motorcycle to Big Ritchie (see Volume II), who, sadly but true-to-form, promptly sold it for crack money. Whatever. Anyhow, my thinking at that point was to go to Israel and stay there for a year or so, work on a kibbutz where I'd kick the Vicodin habit and start again, i.e., recreate myself at thirty-two. All told, between working as

Jimmy D's helper (Volume II) and that decision, it had been about twelve years of keepin' on truckin'. Enough with it. Mission accomplished, I became that trucker's trucker, the man to call when the job needed special attention and a reliable force behind it, a man whose reputation alone did all the advertising his enterprise needed.

Thirty-one is not nineteen, obviously, and jumping down from the tailgate to the asphalt street was starting to bother me, the impact of landing like that, especially on the bottom of my feet, even wearing heavy work-boots, which I took as a harbinger of change. Another option I considered was taking a loan to expand the operation, the next logical step in progressive growth, but the guys I saw in the business at that level or above were stuck in dusty warehouses or stuffy offices all day in the backwoods of the boroughs like Middle Village, Queens, where I'd much rather not be, doing paperwork or pushing crates of furniture around, sweating payrolls and insurance premiums, wearing t-shirts, not at all what I had in mind when I set out years before, so, in consideration of all that, and my current state of advanced entropy, either way, it was time to move on.

Of course, it wasn't a direct line from JFK to Ben Gurion; there were pit stops to be made along the way. Before selling the truck, I used it as a storage container on wheels, packing up all my belongings, hiring a pro to bring the piano to my

mother's house in PA, and moved in with a neighbor down the street, another guy I knew from "the rooms," as we fellow cultists called our routine meeting locations—usually church basements. Dark-haired and a Murder, Inc., mug-faced Phil was essentially a creative type but lived the blue-collar lifestyle, a working-class hero who drove a tractor-trailer rig for a local supermarket chain before injuring himself on the job, some type of hip displacement.

Aside from the do-gooder, so-called self-help twelve-step cult, we had a lot in common, another knock-around Jewish guy with a flair for the dramatic; he'd even been accepted into the highly and rightly esteemed Actor's Studio and pursued that career before dropping out and somehow settling in behind the big wheel, another trucker. Once I told him of my plans for moving out and moving on, he invited me to move in where I could crash on his couch for a while before making my way to the next stop. Though I always got the feeling he was some kind of closeted homosexual, never a word about a woman, or women, a bachelor in his forties, I gratefully accepted his offer as it appeared to be a brotherly act of sharing at a time of radical transition. Why not, right? As long as we stayed cool, more or less like we were, his possible outside interests were of no concern to me.

If you recall the night of the big bang, the intro to Arkay Trucking Vol. II, when I fired that close-range warning shot at the overgrown bully who stuck his nose where it didn't

belong, that incident began with him semi-playfully shoving me off balance at the grocery store checkout line in front of the pretty cashier. At the time, I played it off like I too was in on the joke, but inside there was no laughter; he just opened an account with me that would not be cheaply closed. There would need to be a settlement first, and there was.

Well, something similar happened with Phil not too far back in time from when I first crashed on his couch. One afternoon when we were mulling about outside one of 'the rooms,' a gathering of colleagues and peers in the parking lot, Phil, being in the light heavyweight class to my welterweight frame, for some unknown reason started to close in on me, fists up, like a boxer stalking his prey into the corner of the ring, causing me to either have to hit him or back up. Though there was no cashier that time to witness my humiliation when I chose the latter, just a couple of other male cultists to whom this was just horseplay, no big deal, I got that, but I didn't like it. As the adult version of a child regularly brutalized by his father, intimidating me like that is akin to treading a minefield. He had been trying to intimidate me, intentionally, even as play, and to an extent, he succeeded, but I didn't let it interfere with our friendship; it was really no big deal, 'boys will be boys,' until you make the next wrong move, and then it is.

On the third or fourth night on his couch, he made the next wrong move and insult met injury when seated at his dining room table about to dig into a meal he just prepared for

himself, in response to some forgotten domestic issue, he told me in no uncertain terms, if I didn't like it, I could "...*get the fuck out!*" Now again, let me emphasize that although I was still somewhat functional and somewhat organized in my thinking, rotating pharmacies and making arrangements to ship a brand new on/off-road Honda 350 over to the Promised Land, I was actually coming apart, half a step from wit's end, the remaining fragments of my life slipping away into the fog of the looming abyss, and like with the SNL fat boy and that AFTRA creep, if this is the end I'm not going out with a whimper caused by the likes of a closeted homosexual, 'recovering' addict, and failed actor; it's going to be with a bang, a bloody bang, and you're coming with me.

As he spoke the words, he emphasized his point '*get the fuck out,*' by thrusting the steak knife in his right hand above his head into the air, a crazy gesture under any circumstance. I was standing around twenty feet away, at the apartment door, about to leave for my night's activities, having just accepted his invitation, making myself somewhat dependent and reliant on his goodwill, and now this. It didn't take more than that short time for him to play me like that, exploiting my vulnerability by threatening and trying to intimidate me again. That was when the dam broke.

With the residue bad energy of that earlier stalking event now combined with these words and that obscene gesture of betrayal, I snapped, took off at him, and in less than two

seconds reached him from the door, then with a Bruce Li-style roundhouse kick even the master would have been impressed by, landed the top of my foot onto his forehead sending him sailing backward to the floor where within another microsecond I was on top of him, pinning his shoulders to the ground with my knees, and somehow, it's a bit of a blur, got the knife into my hand.

With a fistful of his thick, dark, hair in my left hand, pinning the back of his head to the floor and with the knife cocked back in my right, the point aimed downwards maybe eighteen inches from the center of his forehead, poised in perfect position to drive it through the front of his skull, both of us now frozen silent, I held it there for a moment, eyes fixed on his, then quietly said “*Now what?*” After a two or three-second pause, he opens his eyes, immediately evaluates the new reality and chose to survive by softly responding, “*What're you getting so excited about?*” So I let go. Rage dissipated, and like with the warning shot long before, the point was made (pardon the pun), fuel spent and enough said. He lived, we both did, and the next day I moved out. But it was that close. *Death row.*

Violence after

Now thirty-three years old, no longer a kid, on the rebound from the fall, just after landing back at JFK from several

alcohol-soaked months of falling to pieces in the Promised Land, circling the drain until just about the last possible moment, exactly what the cult warned me about, a self-fulfilling prophecy if ever there was one I had to live in to get out of. The day I decided enough was enough, the almost two-year binge of rampant self-annihilation was over. It had run its course until I was battered badly, but still alive, and decided that it was time to quit, pick up the shattered pieces, and try to get back home (wherever that was, same as my return from the west coast and the jailhouse in Volumes I and II), and put Humpty-Dumpty back together again.

It was then that I found myself in an awfully depressing flophouse shack in the bowels of New York City, a godforsaken pit of Far Rockaway. It was through my usual M.O., finding a “Room For Rent” in the local classifieds and somehow schlepping my suitcases and duffle bag along with me until once again there was a door behind me on familiar ground I could close. Naturally, since I was once again only one or two moves from the park bench, I pretty much grabbed the first one I saw. Now, I began to live off my credit lines, so I wrote the landlord a check for a week’s rent, closed the door, turned off the lights, landed on the squeaky springs of the decrepit, rancid bed with the stained, moth-eaten sheets, and closed my eyes, back in the States now, meaning on solid ground.

The next morning, the first one in months without a blinding hangover, all I could think of was, ‘I gotta get outta this place. Now.’ So, gathering whatever wits I still had about me, I headed outside in search of the nearest payphone and called my always reliable former henchman, trucker’s helper, and bodyguard, Big Ritchie (see Volume II). The phone call went almost exactly the same as the one made under similar circumstances from the New York side of the George Washington Bridge just over a decade before, the one I made to Jimmy Hickey. I barely got out the complete first sentence when Ritchie cut me off: “*Come here.*” Period. End of discussion. Somehow, he understood exactly what had happened and knew exactly what I needed, where I was at, and how to help me, that quick. So, I returned to the flophouse and negotiated a partial refund, then headed off once again by public transportation the twelve or so miles to the leafy suburbs of the formerly cursed, now redemptive Oceanside, Long Island. The town I was once committed to wreaking havoc upon was now about to become my refuge, a sanctuary, a shelter from the storm.

There, he lived in a cozy two-story, three-bedroom, wallpapered, and paneled one-family home on a quiet, tree-covered, dead-end street, a world away from the decaying slums of Far Rockaway and two worlds away from the bowels of the tayelet on Chof Yerushalayim. Ritchie lived with his quintessential Italian Mama, Aurellia, an extra-large Italian-American woman made of warm and billowy pillows

stuffed with ricotta and love, his hard-working and honest German-American father, Fred, his semi-sane younger brother Alan, the biker, musician, union plumber, and sometimes pal, though hardly as reliable, and a sketchy tenant downstairs renting their finished basement. Joining them would be the former renegade outlaw of his imagination *Kabbo*, now the former *Arkay Trucking* magnate in residence.

The whole family knew me, even back in high school when Richie and I were often running partners, before his prison stint in upstate New York. They were grateful that I found a way to put him to work as my backup-backup man during my trucking days. If one of my steady hired hands was a no-show, I'd make a quick call to him, even at 6 am, and they'd rush him over to meet me at my truck and the day's work would get done. They were thankful that I had helped them “*put food on the table*,” as they phrased it, so were eager to jump in and come to my aid during a rough time. Right away, they put me to sleep on Richie's small upstairs bedroom floor alongside his bed, with my belongings stored somewhere safe and handy in the house. It wasn't all that comfortable, but it was safe, clean, and I wasn't alone. Besides, I was a mess, detoxing from almost two straight years of everyday drug use and, towards the end, the last few months of alcohol abuse. I probably could have benefited from formal rehab, but all things considered, they'd be supportive of me right there and then just how I was—broken, bleeding, and otherwise alone in this

world—so it would have to do, my best overall option, and it did.

Like with the other three men in her home, Mama Aurelia did my laundry and left the clean clothes at the foot of the bed I moved to in Alan's room. I'd come back and find it lovingly folded, usually still dryer-warm. On Sundays, there was an early family dinner, when the uncles, aunts, and cousins, including two of their very lovely twin nieces in their twenties, would come over. Together, we'd all enjoy one of her "*mangia everybody*" feasts. The woman could cook, knowing which butchers to buy from, precisely what and exactly when, where to get the best pasta and produce; veal, pork, and beef carefully crafted into perfect meatballs bathed in homemade tomato sauce, alongside bakery-fresh ciabatta and green-leaf salads with bowls of dripping black olives, red peppers, green olives, marinated beets and artichoke hearts drenched in homemade dressing. Like store-bought tomato sauce, a bottled dressing would have been an insult so don't even ask; it was endless. She was all mother, all the time. Not long after I moved in, Aurelia took me aside and quietly said: "*Rob, we love you, you can stay here with us until you get married.*" I'm not even sure if I paid any rent.

After less than a week, Big Al took up a new avocation and practically moved out, leaving his room, bed, color TV, and Pitbull puppy, Max, to me. He was a bit taller than Richie, maybe 6' 2" or 3", probably a trim 230 lbs., with a

well-proportioned quarterback build, broad-shouldered, and hollow-eyed, often brooding, sometimes leering, almost handsome, except for his dangerous wild streak, which was somehow detectable, probably through regular appearance of his dark half-grin. You never knew when he might turn on you and use his size to try to intimidate you, or worse, batter you to pulp. He'd gone after me once or twice before; I was able to fend him off, but barely. Yet beneath all that pretentious hostility was a genuinely generous and sensitive soul in almost steady, quiet agony. A union plumber by trade, a profession he was quite proud of, and boasted about the Masonic origins and Latin provenance of the word, was also a decent musician. He'd set up his stereo sound system and electric guitar, probably a classic Les Paul, and an amp in the living room to finger-pick along with the Dead and played pretty well too, improvising his own soulful riffs, especially to their iconic masterpiece *Dark Star*, the Ur version off the 1969 studio release. On a solo trucking job out to Chicago, he loaned me *Terrapin Station* on cassette to take along for the nearly endless ride, which I'd never heard before, another musical expansion courtesy of Jerry and the boys, and my pal Big Al. He and Horsehead (Volume I & II) were pretty tight buddies, and both big fans of the Dead, but they had a sort of love/hate thing going on, both competing to see who could be the bigger asshole, which in my sights was pretty much a draw. They'd snap at each other verbally with insults and provocations relentlessly, but it never came to fists. One night,

after hiring the two of them to help me on a big delivery for which a rented 24' U-Haul was needed, up to Cape Cod, an overnighter, when after unloading we slept on the chilled nighttime beach wrapped in thick furniture pads, before heading back to the island the next day. That night, finally quieted down from the day's massive exertion (carefully loading the truck to capacity with expensive furnishings in Manhattan, driving the roughly 300 miles before arriving dog tired late that night, then proceeding to unpack and install the contents into the luxury beach house), we watched an astonishing meteor shower that finally superseded their obsessional jibes and taunts. But the next day, almost as soon as we crossed 95 into the city limits where there was public transportation available, they were back at it again. This time, I'm driving and had to literally pull over and say: "*One of you has to get out.*" I'm not sure which of them it was; it was nuts, but that's what it came to so the rest of the trip was a duo drive, not a trio.

Anyway, he was really kind of an impressive guy, in that sense. Were it not for some sort of mental illness, maybe a chemical imbalance or sorts, he would have likely turned out to be a very successful family man, protector, and provider. So imposing was his presence, stature, and look—the menacing half-grin, the wide shoulders, coal-dark eyes, and below-the-collar-length, dark hair, especially when slung low on the seat, arms reached high, hands gripped on the bars, brake, and throttle of his stripped-down, matte black and

brushed chrome 1,200 Electra Glide, at least the impression and its outward reflection—that none other than the quintessential outlaw motorcycle club, the Big Red Machine, the original one-percenters, the one, the only ‘81’ crew, recruited him as a prospect. In my eyes, that was about as cool as things get. I’m not a big joiner, especially not to rigid groups demanding obedience, unquestioned loyalty, and conformity, even if their outward pretense proclaims the opposite, and think Groucho’s famous dictum again. But if I were to be ‘*outlaw*’ motorcycle club material, there is only one that I would ever even consider: the baddest bad guys with the baddest logo this side of planet Mars, the Hells Angels, and they were grooming him. That would mean if and when the time came, once he got his patch, as a ‘*hanger around*’, I could go on runs with them, Big Al would invite and vouch for me, all I would need was the bike, and I love riding. I can hardly imagine anything cooler, or more fun. Seriously. I’d rather do that than be a US senator or a Wall Street tycoon, not even a Hollywood movie star. Crazy, right? Bad to the bone. That’s me. Kabbo lives! It also meant Al would be away from home for days, sometimes weeks at a time, and that meant he invited me to use his bedroom, a much bigger, corner room than Ritchie’s, complete with a full-sized bed, a color cable TV, and large windows opening in two directions. It also meant he’d be needing help raising his all-white, blue-eyed puppy. Max had to stay behind while Al

was doing whatever prospect business was on his agenda, leaving a gap I was ready to fill.

Leading up to this, one night a few months before flying off to the Promised Land, staying at my mother's house in PA, getting things together before getting on that plane, having already shut down Arkay Trucking—basically abandoning it—and Al already well into his prospecting project, he suddenly gave me a call from out of nowhere special to say he got a day or two off and would pick me up in three hours. "*Be ready*," he said. He had tickets for the Dead show at the Meadowlands that night, and one of them had my name on it.

I'd been to a lot of concerts as a teen: The Who's *Quadrophenia* tour, Dylan at the Garden, ELP and CSNY, many of the top names, and each one an adventure unto itself, almost a spiritual gathering of young, rebellious rock'n rollers, *talkin' 'bout my g-g-generation*, but never until then, though a fan, been to one of the infamous and legendary *Grateful Dead's*.

Right on time, he shows up in his *de rigueur* F150 pickup truck with the eight-ball mounted to the top of the gear stick, and together with my *de rigueur* vial of Vicodin ES, we took the ride. Aside from the throngs of 'Deadheads' filling the parking lot, *'praying for a miracle'* (a last minute ticket), my most lasting impression is of the two large screens bookending each side of the stage. Along with assorted animated graphics, the screens showcased the usual Dead imagery—skeletons on

motorcycles riding through psychedelic explosions melting into dynamic and vivid scenes of musical notes formed by roses surrounding skulls wearing top hats with burning joints dangling from their bony jaws dancing on song sheets—displaying the band’s selected lyrics as sung, one phrase in particular landing deeply and remaining in my consciousness.

One of their classic standbys, “*Uncle John’s Band*,” includes the line, a simple question: “*Are you kind?*” as if that’s all that mattered. That’s all they wanted to know. Even through the miasma of my pathological deterioration, the fall, I got it, and still do, kindness, properly directed, is a virtue unto itself. If it weren’t for Al, I never would have seen the Dead, as Jerry passed from us too soon after, so thanks again, Al, the impulse to have me along for a short stretch of the road was a kindness I don’t forget.

Meanwhile, fast forward to the time after the return from the ill-fated Israel sojourn, the scene of the great and final unraveling, again no bang this time, again, barely a whimper. It wasn’t long before Max, the family, and I bonded, and I became a welcome, value-adding member of the Koenigsdorf clan. After a few nights of restlessness and sleepless nights lying on my back on Richy’s carpeted floor, now in Al’s big, comfortable bedroom, I began to settle down, my nerves relaxing and my thoughts clearing up. That was when I knew it was time to get back to work and earn some money, putting

“food on the table” again and piecing myself back together through honest, steady employment. The rest of my world and recovery from the extended, catastrophic binge, surely would follow. So I went from one odd job to the next: a uniformed limo driver, a traveling carnival barker, a gypsy cab-driver hustling fares with their family car at the airport—anything I could stomach while my brain was sorting itself back out, free from any stimulants (aside from caffeine, of course), depressants, or narcotics. No booze either, of course. I was straight and clean again, but not trucking. That, I vowed, despite the occasional allure of some really decent money probably still available to me in that realm, was behind me. No. Forget it. Since I had the opportunity to recreate myself and start again, that’s when the unlikely and far-fetched idea of becoming an ‘actor’ began to take serious root, along with some type of vague plan beginning to form.

Before making any serious moves in that direction, there was a small, family-run window washing business to manage. Poor, sweet old bedridden Fred, the now ailing dad, had a local window washing service he’d built up over the years, from which jobs came in daily, especially in the spring and fall, which, by now, early April, they were. Fred was on his last legs, facing a terminal illness, but rather than in a hospital or hospice, it was decided that he’d spend his last days on the family sofa downstairs in the cozy family den, surrounded by loved ones, watching TV, eating his meals, and handing me the list of the coming days’ jobs the night before—each task

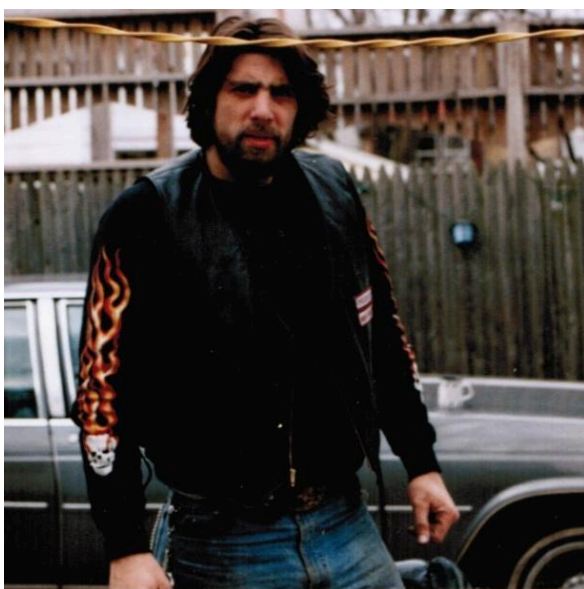
spelled out on handwritten index cards, detailing the who, when, what, and where.

My job was to take Richie and the family business pickup truck, head to the jobsite, do the work, and bring back the bacon. It was pretty easy work: setting up the ladders, mixing the proper cleaning solutions, sorting out the clean rags from the rest, separating storm windows and panes from the screens, wiping the glass down, and putting them all back in place clean as new, then collecting the pay. Every day after the jobs were done, I brought home the proceeds, minus mine and Ritchie's share, and he handed me the next day's cards. Richie and I supplemented the meager hourly pay we got from Fred by finding something else the homeowner customers might need, like having their gutters cleaned or their garages straightened out and emptied of clutter—anything to make a deal with them and keep all that for ourselves, giving Fred exactly what he asked for, no more and no less. Normally, this task would have been left to Alan, but since he was preoccupied, few, if any, days off for him, it fell to me. So I took it on, in part to show my gratitude to real friends, like Kaluga and Jimmy Hickey were to me before then (Volume I)—brothers who were there for me by taking me in when I had nothing to offer in return but gratitude.

The guy downstairs however, was in no way a member of the family. If you can picture a half-cocky, Freewheelin' Franklin from The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers you can get the idea.

Thin with shoulder length hair, a Buffalo Bill mustache, sort of a country-hippie drug dealer/addict style. He kept to himself and as far as I knew, kept up with his rent and made no trouble, until the ugly night he did. In keeping with the program, Fred gave me the keys to the pickup truck to guard and use as needed, for the business, the jobs only, that's it. There was no cause to risk anything that even might damage the vehicle, without that truck, there would be no business and no income from it, so, naturally, I took the responsibility seriously. One night, Mr. Freewheelin' asked me if he could borrow it, for what I don't remember, but I had to say "*No.*" Period. Number one, it wasn't mine and number two, just the fact that he needed it meant he shouldn't have it (why didn't a grown man have his own wheels?), and three? It was a risk we couldn't take. As I said, the guy was sketchy to begin with, and he wasn't family so my no was complete and final. Not long after that brief exchange, me now upstairs in Alan's bedroom playing with Max, shooting at his snout with the fine water spray of an atomizer, him alternately biting and ducking the stream, I heard its engine turn over. He took the keys from where in the kitchen hallway they were hung and started down the driveway. I don't know what he was thinking but whatever it was, it was wrong, way, way off, so I immediately went into emergency mode, flew down the steps and along with Mama Koenigsdorf and Richie took off after him in the family sedan. It didn't take very long to catch up with him, probably less than a mile, but we tracked him to the parking lot of a

schoolyard where he had just pulled over. Who knows what he had going on there, probably a meetup point to score, but it didn't matter. At that point I threw the sedan into Park, jumped out and ran to the pickup, opened the driver's side door, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and shirt collar, pulled his head and upper body out of the cab and into range where I began pounding the top of his head with my right fist, again, and again, and again until there was blood coming from his split skin, then yanked him all the way out, leaving him in a moaning, crumpled heap outside the truck. Then, with Aurelia and Richie behind me in the sedan, we drove the truck back to where it was supposed to be, parked it and brought the keys upstairs with me where I rejoined playtime with Max. That seedy son-of-a-bitch deserved it, and I did it on Alan's behalf, who mighta' done much worse, and we all knew it. Anyway, whatever, I did what had to be done, so, you're welcome, Big Al.



Make love not war

After several months of licking my wounds, healing, gorging on Mama Aurelia's five-star homemade feasts (including the gallons of ice cream and boxes of Oreos they kept in steady stock), and gathering strength at the Koenigsdorf's, like a starfish regenerating a lost arm, it was time to move on. By then, I was cleared up and confident enough to find a place of my own in my old stomping ground, America's Healthiest City, Long beach, where I'd proceed with the task of rebuilding myself into an almost entirely new person. It was another sink or swim crossroads—time to swim. Somehow, with the help of Zeus, I managed to get on the government dole, Social Security Disability, and with my nighttime car service hustle, fed and clothed by my gigolo consort, I began paying the massive credit card debt I piled up while still foundering in a deep, dark sea, still in over my head and seconds away from drowning.

Before migrating back to the beach, still in Oceanside, not really knowing any better or feeling confident enough to break away, even after the delusion broke, I swallowed any residual pride I may have salvaged from the days they called me a “power of example” and returned a fallen loser who had ‘relapsed’ after a long and successful run, and dragged myself back to the cult. This time though, a decade older than the first, now only half believing the rhetoric and eschewing the

guidance of any sort of personal ‘spiritual advisor.’ Even as busted up, desperate and disillusioned as I was, that was one mistake I was not going to repeat. Forget that, ‘*fool me once, shame on you...*’ and knowing the rest of that truism's adage, let’s add: “*we won’t be fooled again...*”.

Once settled on the beach in a humble but comfortable two-room beach shack above a deli, I kept myself together by regularly checking in with the local 'rooms', working the odd jobs, and spending most of my free time up on the boardwalk on two wheels, where I must have logged close to 200 miles over the summer, covering it from end to end on a rusty hand-me-down but functional bike, another gift from my trusty pal, Sergeant Paul. Back and forth, over and over, soaking in the sun and salt spray of the waves, all day and half the night I rode, meditated, hounded babes, and 'recovered' until the season’s end.

Towards the end of summer, and on one of these boardwalk round-trips, I nearly collided with an extraordinarily vibrant woman, practically glowing in the late summer sun, who would turn out to be said consort, and with her, a whole ‘nother dimension of experience would soon all but engulf me.

Chapter VIII: *The rebound*

The beaches of Long Island are hardly the most inspiring I've ever seen. They're actually kind of flat, dull, and aside from the surf itself and the rarely appearing shrubs, without much character or any notable appeal. If you've ever been to Santorini, Krabi, Montañita, Biarritz, Eilat, Dahab or Ipanema though, the point hardly needs to be further made except to say, by comparison, even the famed Hamptons barely rate as beaches at all in my book. It's a shore, yes, clearly, but a 'beach'? *Eh...* Technically? Okay, sure, but it's just sand and sea, the barest minimum — no jungle hills or jagged cliffs behind them, no palm trees on them, no jade islands jutting up off the coast in front of them, only the man-made stone jetties to interrupt the endless nothing, barely even any dunes, mostly dull beige sand and the gray, cold Atlantic water, and a lot of rules. I mean, forget a barbeque; you can't even enjoy a beer on the beach. Really. Some 'land of the free', Gauguin wouldn't have lasted the weekend. I don't see how they could have inspired anything besides the type of consumer, commercial imitation seashore getaway it offered to people who watch television commercials to feed their imagination,

modeling themselves off the images produced to achieve exactly that effect, an almost hollow 'consumer' fantasy. The only thing that prevented it from descending to adjacent Rockaway Beach decay was the five-dollar beach pass needed to enter, and so with that, it was relatively orderly, clean, and crime-free, at least during daylight.

Thankfully though, once a day there was usually a gorgeous exception to the dull routine and mediocrity of the overdeveloped vista's terrain: the stunning sunsets. That's when the soft blue of the sky begins to intensify and deepen, just as the sun turns from a pale yellow-orange to a fiery golden orange, and the clouds, if there are any, start absorbing the intensified hues on their edges, blending into a sort of faded silver, while the inner sections either stay white in vivid contrast or slowly gray themselves before slowly vanishing into the dark. The ocean, a nondescript washed-out gray color, turns a sort of shimmering platinum, a perfect foil for the sky, and all this just as the pace of human life on the sand and up on the boardwalk begins to ease up. The beachgoers pack it in, families, singles, groups of clustered teens, the lifeguards doing their final surveys before almost everyone makes their ways off the sand and wooden planks from where they gradually fade from the scene. That's also when it's the most peaceful, when the expectation of the coming night descends and quiets things down, with only the steady waves and occasional cry of gulls, maybe a lifeguard's whistle breaking the calm, bringing with it both the promise and the warning

that soon, under cover of summer darkness, anything might happen, especially in America's Healthiest City.

On a routine summer afternoon spent riding up and down, keeping in near-constant motion—my favorite mode of being—back and forth the two or so miles from east to west, making the regular pit stops along the way to chat with these friends or those—the surfer's beach crowd, the retired folks seated on chaise lounges outside their high rises, the college-age ticket booth girls—that the big event changed my course, and for the better, mostly. On one of those unforgettable late-afternoon sunsets when I slowed down to pass through the crowded zone in that central commercial area of the boardwalk, where Seymour's and the clam bar were, right by the main wooden ramp heading up and down to the sand, that I was slowed down further in my tracks by a woman who seemed as if she had to suddenly jump to get out of my way. This didn't exactly figure because my eyes were pretty much fixed in front of me where I could easily see everything up ahead in advance of any type of collision, including and especially people crossing my path, even in a crowd, so the abrupt dodge from my path seemed a bit unnecessary, perhaps even somewhat exaggerated, possibly even contrived, almost looking as if she deliberately set out to make it seem like I was about to collide with her.

Once she was safely out of '*harm's way*', I slowed down enough to share a quick and fleeting moment of eye contact,

the natural response to a near collision, faux or otherwise. Right away, at first glance, it was impossible to miss her smile, though it too seemed a bit contrived, it was just like too happy, too pleased to pass itself off as mere relief from avoiding a crash. Rather, it seemed like a smile of deeply surprised profound delight, like she already knew me, and so brilliant, as if it was a natural extension of the sun's golden fire.

Quick thought: Okay, *so what?* She was a bit older than my eyes ordinarily set upon, and a few pounds heavier as well, wearing a beach robe over a one-piece, and she was blond—none of them characteristics of my normal target identification protocol, but she was female, that was for certain, the generous curves complimenting the smile registered as well, so I gave her a quick smile back and kept riding on without so much as a second thought. I was looking for young hunnies in bikinis these days, or at least short-shorts and bikini tops, not heavy blond mamas, no matter the curves or intensity of their smiles.

Over the next week, the same thing happened two or three times again, and at about the same time and location—early sunset, same woman, same type of awkward faux collision, same smile. By, let's say, the third time, it was getting ridiculous, but then, I noticed her eyes; they were the same green as mine, and with all that, I finally stopped to see what was up with her. *Who's colliding into who? Who is she? What*

is this old broad thinking? Does she know me? Do I know her? What's going on here? And the rest, like they say, is history, this history.

For some reason, probably due to the focused powers of her well-honed persuasion techniques—not the least of which having to do with those curves, now even more apparent just under the snug robe, those penetrating green eyes, and that electrifying smile, all framed within the setting sun illuminating the fresh salt air breeze—she succeeded in inducing me off my trusty, rusty but precious wheels and down onto the sand, leaving it up there locked to the iron boardwalk rails where I could keep an eye on it. She suggested another contrivance: that we separate, allow her to descend back down to the sand and reach her blanket before I just happened upon them a few minutes later, and approach the little boy first as he scanned the coast for a kadima partner. I should volunteer to play with him, and then, before accepting my offer, he would introduce me to his mom. This way, she calculated that the ‘first’ encounter would be at his initiative, and that would enable him to relax in my company more than if she just sprung me on him.

Again, it's not like she was my type, not so much at all, but she did have that brilliant smile highlighting a confidently persuasive air, so I took up her offer and proceeded with the plan. The next thing you know, it's the three of us on her blanket with Mikey, the little boy, as the master of ceremonies,

doing the introductions, asking the questions, and deciding when it was time to play. I was just going along with this because, well, there wasn't much else going on, and I saw no harm; my bike and the boardwalk weren't going anywhere, so why not? I wasn't signing up for anything else with an about-to-be-divorced Jewish lady from the hoity-toity Five Towns in her mid-late thirties, with a child, and all it looked like she wanted, or needed, was a little attention from this just about down-and-out, sun-soaked, bike-riding beachcomber. *Okay, why not? I thought. What've I got to lose? Let's see where this goes.*

After about an hour on the beach, enjoying the last moments of the glittering platinum sea and the blazing orange gold of the setting sun, whacking that ball back and forth with Mikey, the three of us packed up and headed to her parked BMW sedan, with which she offered to drop me and my wheels off home. Together, we opened the trunk hatch, lifted and placed my trusty, rusty old boardwalk cruiser inside her late model German chariot, and then with it drove me the half mile to the rented ground floor apartment now shared with that process server. Once there, after removing the bike while swapping small talk, mini bios, and phone numbers, we topped the novel encounter off with a plan to meet again later that week. And with that, as they say, we were off to the races.

The races.

The next meetup rolled around, sans the little guy, probably off at camp, school, or keeping his banished-to-the-basement dad company. That absence cranked up the energy, making the encounter even more electrifying, exchanging involuntary, the almost reflexive anticipatory glances, a mixture of fear and fire (*'I don't know exactly where this is leading but I'm sure going to find out as there's no stopping this'*). We kicked it off at our usual spot but quickly ended up in my bedroom, where we immediately got down to business. Out of the station it was mostly her driving the passion train, but quickly pulled me in so deep into a flood of pent up passion that had been building in her for a decade, since the breakup with her last lover back in college days, a state-wide body-building champ, and now, after all the frustration, disappointment, and delay, and in her sexual prime, suddenly released. It's not an exaggeration to say, in those bouts, I had lost my mind, at least the part that was rational and cared anything about dignity, ethics, or decorum. Forget all that. This went on for weeks, almost every day, like a tornado that had us both dazed, giddy and reeling before we could pause long enough to grasp the bigger picture of what was actually happening.

For starters, she was still technically married to her former designated bread-winner, a well-known and respected Five Towns chiropractor currently residing in their subterranean home office. Up until recently, together they presented the

classic image of a rising ‘power couple’—the ones who inspire either envy or adulation, sometimes both, like they've got it all together but no one's really home behind closed doors. *Shelly*, let's call her, was president of the Cultural Arts department at the local prep school, the same one Rocco attended, on the board of the local Conservative synagogue, he, a member in good standing of the State Chiropractic Society, both members of the Millionaires Club, the works. But that impressive facade? By the time we rang each other's bells, it was shattered, and publicly. Somehow, word of the financial, then marital failure got out, so now, her move was to bring yours truly into the scene, and just about to center stage, as a high profile supporting character to her disgraced persona. It was in part her way of showing that she could still spin straw into gold. Let's call him “Marty” the chiropractor, though smart, ambitious, personable, and a gentleman, imagine Martin Landau as a Dead fan, wasn't much of a lady-killer or man's man, more a low-key professional with whom she shared no chemistry, while I, on the other hand, to her I was some kind of renegade, a Jewish trouble-maker and macho stud that not only lit her fire but burned her house down to the ground, right how where she wanted it, whether driving her BMW around town or on my rusty boardwalk bike, it ‘made no never mind’. The ladies with money, hell, they didn't need me for that, so, there was another *niche* I was equipped for and could happily fill.

It's funny, in an ironic way, how two people in different stages of similar messes manage to find each other and click; a former Five Towns trucker turned down-on-his-luck beach bum on the rebound, connoitering with former Five Towns nobility still on her way down? Sounds like the start of a risque joke, but when I say '*click*', at risk of redundancy, I mean fireworks, supernovas, as degenerate and ongoing as thrilling, the whole arsenal ignited at once, again and again and again, the intensity only intensifying as intimacy expanded and eroticism deepened.



The tacit but salient fact was, their marriage was dead in the water right from the start. The ill-suited couple found out on their honeymoon, it was a mismatch, a fundamental one, no energy between the sheets, the sine qua non. I mean, how do you miss that kind of detail before taking the vow? Well, apparently they did, but chose to soldier on anyway, building up this facade of success that was on strong foundation for the

first few years, until, after too many bad investments, followed by too much good money chasing a lot of bad, it wasn't. Marty did his level best to hide it, and for quite a while succeeded, borrowing from Moe to pay back Curly, then from Shemp to pay back Moe, it turns out though, you can't paper over those expanding and deepening cracks forever, sooner or later, reality wins, every time. His practice was booming, sure, but underneath it all, they were drowning in debt, not even any home equity left, all leveraged and now in the red, and she knew nothing about it until she found out all about it, and all at once.

Shelly came from a well-respected, high-profile Jewish family out in the Midwest. Her grandfather was a courtroom judge, and her parents owned a major brand bicycle factory and the land they built it on. Meanwhile, her husband was more of a self-made man, determined to work his way up rung by rung up the ladder of the Tony Robbins version of the 'American dream,' whom she took a chance on. Together, they made it work, or so they thought, until the truth came first trickling in to him, then crashing down around both of them. Now, here we are, otherwise an odd couple, and at just the beginning of her midlife crisis, where I'm caught up in that all-too-familiar family drama, very near the eye of that storm, playing a role I never imagined.

It kicked off at full speed from the first go-round. I won't describe with intimate detail what it involved, but I will say,

not unlike my earlier connoiter with Elizabeth (Volume II) regarding the direction and psychosexual context, only factors of magnitude above and beyond. She found her way into my deepest realms where she not only nursed the core of my passions but inflamed and shared them, complimented them in ways that before had been literally unfathomable. Viva la discovery. The language she used, the ‘pillow talk,’ was of such intense specificity, combined with the physical chemistry that brings it all together, that it kept us together as a solid pair-bond for over a year and a half despite the social and economic incongruities. Ultimately, like all the other longer-term ‘love affairs’ I’ve had—from Sherry (Volume I) to Shelly (Volume III), a handful or more—eventually dies of its unkept promises, drowned by deceit, driven into the bottomless depths by selfishness, fear, and resentment. “*Relationships are hard*,” said *Bernie the Bunyip* to *Diver Dan*. Yeah. Hard.

In another example of reality slowly but inexorably gaining the upper hand, the descent began simultaneously with the ascent. After the first or second go-around, she handed me a fistful of quarters for me to use to call her from payphones, probably about ten or twenty dollars’ worth. Once the quarters were gone, she gave me an account code to make payphone calls with, which would be billed to her and Marty. Fine. Okay. Generous, but uncalled for. I didn’t need her charity, but if she wanted to give it, okay, why not? I’ll take it. That was

alright, a bit humbling, but what the hell, as if I had a recently uncovered trust fund somewhere.

A few days after she told me the code, she changed it and never gave me the new one, making up some story to explain it away which I didn't even bother to follow, and didn't make a big deal out of it because I never asked her for it, so who cared? But I did take note. The second or third time she made a house call to my shared abode, she sized up the needs of two bachelors on their own, and filled our refrigerator with enough expensive groceries to last a whole company of bachelors for weeks, and high-quality stuff too, salmon and steak, reminiscent of my shoplifting mania days. Again, no one asked her, but we took and appreciated it. Again, why not? At that point, we were hosting another Sunday afternoon 'eating club' event with two or three more bachelor friends, including a local photographer '*recovering*' in the cult and Brother Al and his Pitbull puppy Max, so the provisions were happily used as intended, we feasted while the feasting was good. The long-haired photographer, another marcher to his own drum, knew how to make just-the-right-weight apple-jack pancakes and another member knew how to grill perfect steaks, it was all good and nobody missed the booze, or a meal. Later on, while Shelly and I were in deep conversation about our respective worldviews and modus operandi for getting through it, she revealed: "*When I meet new people, at first, I flood them with kindness. As much as it takes. Then, I set the*

rules.” (Note to the uninitiated: People rat on themselves. All you have to do is listen.)

Anyway, she was a woman most people found it hard, if not impossible, to say “*no*” to. For example, I'd be doing my routine Jack Lalane workout at their premiere club in Rockville Center, where only paid-up members and their approved guests, accompanied by the member at the time of check-in, were allowed past the check-in desk facing them as soon as they entered the building, usually staffed by at least two, if not more, trainers and managers. And all of a sudden, there she'd be, hovering above me as I grunted on the bench press, virtually undeterrable—picture a curvy Madonna in dark sunglasses and thigh-high black leather boots in your face—her will indomitable as she methodically strips away any reason to resist her. And soon her will focused on getting me into her house, her home, where she lived with Marty and Mickey and a cat.

It was to be a new family arrangement, a mother, an estranged dad, a new ‘*friend*’ of Mikey’s who stayed with his mom in her bedroom, and a gray house cat we called Tweeder-weeder. At first, and for a while, a couple of months, I resisted, told her there was no way I was going to sleep with another man’s wife in his home, that it was stupid, wrong, and possibly suicidal, but she was relentless, pointing out all the advantages we’d enjoy in that arrangement, focusing particularly on her feeding me, and clothing me from Marty’s wardrobe,

expensive stuff he never wore, and close enough to my size along with her other more compelling inducements and offerings.

Naturally, because of her consistency, and the lure of a ‘home’, love, and companionship, I bargained, telling her I’d first need a letter from hubbykins explicitly stating that it was alright, with his permission, and that their marriage was all but legally dissolved; that he was only still on the premises because of matrimonial law and financial considerations, not wanting to surrender his share of whatever the corner property across from the beautiful synagogue’s remaining value might be salvaged by “abandoning” it, and that he was actually perfectly fine with me being there and that I should feel welcome. Well, hubbykins, no stranger to her will, quickly complied and with that letter, and without moving out of East Atlantic Beach right away, I took the step, took the drive, opened the door and made myself comfortable. In fact, he didn't care, it turned out he was totally fine with it, and although it was a bit awkward at first, mostly to me, we got comfortable with one another to the point where I thought nothing of it after a few weeks.

She created a new family, and a new home, a home where as promised I was fed, clothed, and fucked like royalty in exile. All I had to do was submit. And submit, I happily did. What a trip. What a wild, astonishing, and thrilling trip that was. When I eventually face my Maker, if He asks: “*Well, did you*

get your wildest sexual desires fulfilled?” the answer will have to be an immediate, unqualified, and resolute, “*Yes, dear L-rd. They were. Thank you.*” If He asks “*What did she do with a stick of red licorice?*” that will go with me to my grave, and beyond. If the good Lord wants to know, but somehow doesn’t? He’ll have to ask her. I won’t say a word. Omerta. Not even to Him. Of course, not everything was hearts, flowers, and insane sweet nothings left on scrap paper tucked into places she knew I’d stumble onto them, the words put to deed between the sheets.

Another expiration date.

At the time, my connection to the Koenigsdorf clan was primarily aimed at helping a gradually degenerating, shaky Al move out of his parents’ home, get his own apartment, and sober up, as I myself had done years before and was now doing again. He was enduring bouts of extended depression, losing his medications, fits of sudden rage, and disappearing without a word for days, even weeks at a time. Even while on prospecting duty he would usually let his mom, dad, Richie or me know where he’d be and probably when he’d be back, but that was no longer in effect and mama Aurelia was getting more and more worried. In response, I introduced him to the the local crowd of the self-declared do-gooder cult, but to no avail, though he came along with me a handful of times, he saw them as a society of self-absorbed whiners. At about the

same time, I introduced him to the Gades, the old folks whose studio apartment at the beach back I rented back in '77-78 (Volume II) and was still somehow on good terms with who agreed to let him move in. One early fall afternoon, while we were preparing the apartment for him to move into, painting the interior of the same single-room studio I rented years before, and momentarily upbeat about his future, he was still a union plumber and still had a loving family, a loyal girlfriend, a great dog, and me, a good friend, it seemed all was not lost. That was enough to build on, I thought, and he was going along with the plan, but most of the enthusiasm was coming from me while he barely seemed to care very much one way or the other, not about me, not about himself, not really anything, except Max, who we both loved. The pooch was as bonded to me as he was to Al. In fact, it was me Max spent most of his time with while I was still in their home and his master was prospecting. I walked him and their other older but loving family mutt Sheba twice a day, long walks including rough-and-tumble puppy playtime in the schoolyard with the two of them, and me having to stop Max from beating up the much older, but still game, black and white, long-haired Sheba. Regardless of the attention and time I devoted to him, Max was still Al's.

After separation, once I moved out but reconnected with Max and Al here or there, once I came into view, say on the boardwalk or on the beach, Max went nuts. I mean headstands and somersaults in the air, not for minutes, but nonstop until

we both had to grab him and calm him down, which he slowly, sputtering, eventually did, but might just suddenly, spontaneously start up again. Crazy. But, that's how fueled with love and joy he was for me. And it was reciprocal, minus the backflips and tail wags. But I loved that pooch; it was almost scary, eerie, the clarity and degree of nonverbal communication we shared, staring into each other's eyes, almost seeing the love energy itself somehow channeling back and forth from human to animal, as if species made no difference at all. Eerie, mystifying, unforgettable.

There was the afternoon a few weeks before when Al brought him over to visit our seaside bachelor's den. We were all sitting around the dining table—me, Big Al, Al the housemate, and another guy, probably *Pancakes* Mike—with Max seated on the floor alongside two of us, when a sudden knock on the door came from the landlord, a very large man, like pro-football large, a Wall Street type and former college athlete now on the way up the ladder of the finance world, i.e., a soft-spoken gentleman. He was just stopping by to say 'hello' on a peaceful Saturday. When we opened the door, all Max saw was this huge figure filling the entire door frame, top to bottom and damn near side to side. Something about the dude and what he felt and saw triggered him, and he went off, he began barking, like we never heard before, not the usual high-pitched puppy *arf arf*'s but full-throated and nonstop barks. He was less than a year old, up on his hind legs barking at the dude, who just stood there, not even bothering to come

in as he must have originally intended. It wasn't hostile, but it wasn't friendly either; he sensed a possible threat. And Max was there to protect; that the guy was at least five times bigger than him meant nothing. Zero.

Then there was that time on the landing between the two staircases in the Koenigsdorf home, where Max was headed up and I down, on the landing where we stopped, we locked eyes and just stared for a moment, just two animate beings frozen in a transcendent moment of shared love and profound appreciation without the need for words. The clarity of the communication: *'I love you. I love you too. I love you more. No, I love you more'*, that kind of thing, deeply, almost spooky, and unforgettably clear, penetrating to the core.

That last, terrible afternoon, while Al and I were painting his soon-to-be new home, I let Max out of the apartment to give us both a break from the fumes, despite his master warning me, *"Put him on the leash."* *"No, he doesn't need it. He listens,"* I insisted while opening the door and leading him outdoors. That was when Max suddenly went nuts again, but for no apparent reason. This time, he ran like a dog whose tail was on fire, in expanding circles, around and around the front lawn and into the street in an ever-widening circumference. It was dangerous, so I began yelling, *"Max! Max!"* to get his attention and stop him. At that, Al ran out to see what was happening. He never didn't listen to me, ever, but this time he

kept going as if he didn't hear me. It must have been the paint fumes.

We both saw what was coming before we had a chance to stop it, a moment of frozen horror. He ran in his widest circle out off the front lawn into the wide street, West Broadway, an east-west boulevard where he was hit by a speeding car, letting out a last yelp of shock and pain. When we ran to him, just by the terrible sound of the impact, we knew, and the car never even slowed down, and the driver just kept going. Then, standing above and looking down, we watched helplessly as the life in Max's beautiful blue eyes vanished. I saw it leave, they turned from shock, fright, and pain to blank and lifeless mirrors with no reflection. Al stood in front of me, closer to our lost buddy's lifeless form, deliberately giving him that space. My impulse was to jump up on his back and hug him, share the pain with him that way, but I didn't. I held back. Why? I'm not sure. Maybe it was fear. Maybe I was immobilized by my own shock. Instead, a moment or two later, together we picked Max up, laid him gently in the back of his pickup, and he drove away, leaving me standing there alone. Maybe I should have. G-d help them both; it was the most devastating sight I ever saw with my own eyes. Devastating. Poor, lost Max, I am so, so sorry. To this day, I think of you, my crucial, life-ending error, where that moment's eternal, irrevocable, and unmitigated devastation remains. Somehow, someday, I will find another "Max" or, as

Schopenhauer and the Hindus call them, *Atman*, and raise him on the beach where I will guard his life like it's my own.

A not-so-surprising sudden appearance.

On an otherwise quiet afternoon a day or two later, there was another knock on my apartment door. There he was, again, a large and looming presence, this time, though expressionless, menacing: Big Al, standing in his prospect vest in the open doorway, almost as tall as the doorway itself. For a split second, we looked at each other, as if we both recognized the moment's inevitability. Somehow, I expected this, for him to go after me at some point. Of course, I didn't foresee the circumstances, but this was Al, turning on whoever got close enough and stayed long enough; there was always a reason, so it was a no-surprise surprise. He came for revenge, rushing in without so much as a single word, grabbing me by the shoulders, and pulling me outside into the street where he did his best to pummel me in broad daylight, in the middle of the street, in full view of all the startled neighbors. We had tussled before, so I kind of knew how to defend myself from him. His center of gravity was at just the right height for me to get inside and prevent him from using his strength, reach, and leverage from tackling or throwing me, and even to a large extent from landing any solid blows. But I couldn't fight back. All I could think of, besides surviving, was his father, poor Fred, enduring his last breaths on that sofa, and Max, and my

fault, and not hugging him, so I just armadillo'ed up for a long, ugly moment of shame and sorrow, overwhelmed by guilt, fear, and pity, until a few minutes later when two squad cars showed up in response to a neighbor's call. The cops separated us, three or four of them, then with him restrained, one asked me if I wanted to press charges. At that moment, for the second time, I looked in Al's eyes as if to say "*I forgive you, asshole!*" Then after a second or two's pause, looking now back at the cop, shook my head, no. Of course not. Forget it. For me, it was over, debt paid to the extent I could, but I knew for him it wasn't. He hadn't been able to deliver any punishing blows, he didn't want me walking away, he wanted a stretcher and an ambulance, or worse, a hearse, so I knew he'd be back.

As soon as the cops left and he got back in his pickup, I put in a call to Shelly: "*Come pick me up, I'm getting out of here. Now.*" By that afternoon, using her luxury chariot to pack my single-suitcase belongings and assorted whatnots, we moved me out and found myself another furnished room, this one even closer to the Keonigsdorfs and ironically, just on the other side of cursed Oceanside, now turned refuge. It somehow felt secure and clean enough, another fresh start, and no one knew I was there except for Shelly and Gino, the recently divorced landlord of the modest, well-kept two-story colonial where he rented out the two upstairs bedrooms.

As soon as I was settled in, making a quick move, I had Shelly drive us to Pennsylvania to my mother's two-family antique mansion on the Delaware where, in a locked file cabinet drawer stored in her basement, I had stashed my treasured Walther PPK for just such an occasion. In yet another moment of almost sublime devastation, I opened the drawer only to find it gone. The gun was a gift, bought and stored legally for me by my precious Mom-Mom Sylvia. It was our totemic bond, a symbol of our shared appreciation of gangsters and actors portraying gangsters, and willingness to take on that role in either sense, left in trust with her daughter, who decided she had the right to dispose of it, and then to top it off with an act of textbook narcissistic '*gaslighting*', denied any knowledge of its existence at all.



Of course, before leaving it there months before, on my way to bottoming out in the Promised Land, I asked her permission to store it in her home, where it was one hundred percent legal, and gave her the key to the locked

file cabinet drawer, just in case, G-d forbid, she needed it. To her, this was carte blanche license to steal it from me, and G-d only knows what she did with it, but I returned to Oceanside, empty-handed, vulnerable to attack except for my wits, which turned out to be just enough. Word came from a former neighbor that he did return a day or two later, but not alone. This time it was two motorcycles, he had another prospect with him, this time he intended to get the satisfaction he left without the last time, but I had moved too fast, so now, I had to be on the lookout. I figured if worse came to worst, I'd handle it without shooting him, but the pistol would have been a comfort, and handy should he converge on me with any biker partners. True enough and an even more poignant irony, only those you allow that kind of closeness can inflict that sort of betrayal, damage, and pain. Ain't life "*grand*" - as Mom-Mom and I used to joke.

It was just about then that Al was enduring much more serious, self-inflicted harms—that impulse that both the family had previously hoped I might be able to help him get past. One late summer night, again when he had some free time from his prospecting responsibilities, he rode over to the regular Tuesday bike-night rally at the massive, local Nathan's Hot Dog joint in the heart of cursed Oceanside. The place looks like an old World War II airplane hangar where motorcycle enthusiasts come by the hundreds to show off their customized machines, party together, and generally have a low-key blast. There's rarely, if ever, any trouble there, though

the cops are on hand in force just outside the venue; they don't really bother anyone because, generally speaking, aside from the disruptive roars of the unmuffled engines, no one causes any headaches. In fact, it's a good night for local businesses, especially Nathan's, who sell a lot of hot dogs and beer to the happy, thirsty crowd. It's just a cool, fun, weekly outdoor event in the warm weather where even non-bikers can enjoy the display of a vast collection of powerful, two-wheeled machinery filling the parking lot, mainly Harleys, and mostly beautifully, certainly uniquely customized.

As far as I knew, the event, like Nassau County at large, was Pagan, another bad-boy, one-percenter biker club territory. In this case, 'their territory' means that only they are allowed to 'fly' (wear outdoors) their 'colors' (official patches) there, and no other biker clubs dare violate that one-percenter code under threat of battle, possibly escalating to all-out war, but it happens. 'One percenter' (outlaw) bikers will be outlaw bikers. Bloodshed. That meant that biker-night at Nathan's was an unofficial Pagan party so that showing up, even just wearing any other clubs' prospect jacket (in this case identifiable by the red and white colors of the name patch above the vest's front pocket), without even the actual patch or specifically identifying insignia ("81", "big red and white machine" etc.), was a blatant challenge and a serious one.

Big Al, my guess, probably coked out and maybe even on 'ludes at the same time, decided he'd try to impress his 81

comrades by not only showing up in his patchless prospect colors but when confronted by one of the deeply offended Pagans, he responded, true-to-form, by kicking over the angry dude's bike. That, of course, led to an immediate and severe public beating and the confiscation of the vest which, I'm told, had to later be negotiated back by the clubs' respective leadership. This put an end to Al's prospecting adventure, and it came close to ending his life. Once he was released from the hospital, bad came to worse.

It was only a month or two after my quick move, spending half my time with Shelly and the other half moonlighting as a graveyard shift car service driver, at the gym or with the cult, that I spotted him at a local 7/11. That's another horrifying sight I'll never shake. He had gotten into some type of chase—I think it was with the cops on the parkway—when he slid into a skid, dragged by the bike on his face, and now looked like an emaciated Phantom of the Opera without the mask. Again, he saw me see him; he saw my sudden horror and sorrow; I saw his pain and resignation, it was over (*look what I did to myself*), and we left it at that. I turned and walked away, he remained where he was. A short time later, deeper into the fall, the next I heard, Al locked himself in his family garage with the speed and heavy bag and weights he'd never use again, and there he blew his brains out. Free at last. In any case, my takeaway is the friendship—his inviting me in when I was so alone and in need, sharing his family, his bedroom, and his puppy, whereas with Big Richie, I was

another brother. It is with that in mind I dedicated the first volume to his memory, along with two other brothers, Jimmy Hickey and David Klugman; all three had shown me the same generosity and kindness in the same circumstances and ended their own lives young. It is their memory and for their acts of selfless kindness and sharing, all three of them, that I hope to help keep alive with these tales, as well as my own, all four of us. G-d rest their souls, as mine is still bound to this mortal coil.

Chapter IX: *The big move*

The year and a half spent in Oceanside turned into a sort of gestation period where a new and improved me was slowly taking form and emerging, with very few fits and starts. Once I rooted myself in healthy soil, Gino's, it was pretty much a slow, deliberate, and straight line-up. Little by little, on Food Stamps, eating canned beans cooked on a hotplate, riding the rusty bicycle to the local supermarket, gym, and car-service gigs—rain, snow, or shine—and using public transportation to therapy and probation, I started to sift through the rubble, take stock, formulate a plan and a strategy, and began to execute. The status quo was sustainable in the short to midterm. As bad as things were, at least from the vantage of the former Mr. Arkay Trucking—“*a gentleman in Woodmere*”, as the local college radio station DJ dubbed me after I called in a request for Circus Maximus' classic “*The Wind*”—no wheels, back on felony probation like I was a troubled teenager and not a responsible adult man in his thirties, needing the hernia repaired, still spitting blood, dependent on Shelly for additional transportation, real food, Marty's old clothes, and comfort, things could have been a lot worse, like they had been. At least I had kicked the codeine jones, was now totally

straight, and in therapy getting my feet back on solid ground, paying off credit card cash advances in place of drawing on them. But again, not sustainable long term, it was clear that I had to get out and move on.

Shuttling from Gino's to Shelly's and the few other regular stops already listed, including a weekly visit to another major-matzo ball-pillow of a chick named Mae Goldstien, a Long Beach Hospital social worker who held me steady while the wheel set right, gave me time to look deeper and further into a new life, a sustainable one for the long term. That's where and when the idea of 'actor' and 'private investigator' first took solid root, followed by the first necessary steps to bring them to fruition. With that, I was directed to every do-gooder state and county agency out there set up to help people like me get back on their feet after some kind of serious fall, and there were plenty, and they were all one hundred percent legit. One program paid for school; I enrolled full-time at the famous CUNY school beginning the next fall semester. Another paid for my books, classroom expenses, and travel. Another paid my rent and gave me health care coverage. It was a poor man's gold mine, and I took full advantage in all the ways they intended for the recipients, i.e., to make good. The thing was, the first order of business was to get away from the current you-know-who. And why was that necessary? Because, like with that phone code she gave me and took back a week later, by the last winter holiday season we spent (almost) together, it was clear that this was the story,

this was her M.O. repeating itself in one form after the other and it wasn't ever going to stop until I called it quits. Of course, she talked a big game: we were gonna settle down and live happily ever after on her alimony, child support, and property settlement, in addition to whatever she got from her well-to-do family, and I was gonna be her happy-go-lucky sex toy, enjoying the ride. Okay. Not bad, especially because the ooh-la-la was so insanely hot, hot, hot. But she didn't mean it. She liked saying it, and at the peak of romantic fervor she almost got herself to believe it ("*All the world's a stage...*"), but when that energy reverted back to normal, she'd quickly back down and out. Whether it was cold feet, or selfishness, or fear she couldn't hold me because she was a few years older (she mentioned that), I'll never know, but I know that on that last holiday season, may have even been the first night of Hanukkah or Christmas, after she got a phone call that her grandmother passed on and was summoned back home to North Dakota, after first having said she was bringing me to meet her family, then nixing the next day by saying she'd leave the house and car keys with me so I wouldn't be alone and could stay there with Marty and Mikey while she was gone, then taking even that back, I knew it was a dead end and the time to head on out was here, painful as that would be. Note to self: *Another minute indulging in fantasyland with her would be a wasted one.* So, that's what I did. She left for the funeral and loverboy made up his mind. It wasn't easy though, and we all know why. Nothing that hot is purely sexual.

You're not gonna have it like that with a hooker or a casual fling; that kind of steam is going to generate intense emotions as well, which will prove themselves to be measures of even deeper entanglement than the ones expressed by the private parts between the sheets. At one point, she told me she was pregnant, to which I responded in my standard way to such pronouncements (there'd been quite a few): I'd be there whatever she decided, but the pregnancy, according to her, ended in a miscarriage. At another point, she told me she was diagnosed with some type of cancer, shaking me so deeply I gave her a highly prized gold chain I wore around my neck that was somehow salvaged from better days. As it turned out, the diagnosis was a false alarm, but I lost another gold chain over it (see Volume II). Do I regret giving that gift? You bet I do. I didn't have the luxury she had of taking things back.

Even with all that, when even the sex life began sputtering in frequency if not intensity, getting out and away took months of doing, painful, stressful months, clinging to Mae, driving all night, wrapping cash in a roll, eating out of that stained hotplate, making trips by train into the city in search of housing for school. But it all had to be done, and there was only one destination in mind: forward, ahead. Nothing else could happen before shaking that last dependency and replacing it with independence. I had to claim my freedom, get my balls back, and do something more productive with

them than play those adolescent games in my mid-thirties. Coinciding with this, Gino, stricken by his on illness, both imaginary and authentic, walking around the front lawn of his modest property on a busy suburban avenue in his bathrobe and slippers, like he was Vinny “*the chin*” in Greenwich Village, for his own reasons, I also don't know, decided he wanted his upstairs back and that both me and the other bachelor tenant would have to move on. Fine. One of the last days Shelly came for an uninvited visit; I had already taken back the house key I'd given her months before, and in some kind of routine domestic melee, I pushed her into the stairwell wall where her big ass broke the sheetrock. Of course, that meant I had to shell out money for Gino to have it repaired, about a hundred bucks, but he wasn't mad. He understood, saying: “*Rob, don't feel too bad, I get it but that's nothing. The last time my ex-wife visited me here, by the time she left I lost half my house.*” I got it too. He was right. I got off cheap to be rid of her like that, not including my lost gold chain. Anyway, the gestation period had been long enough, much of the debt was paid down. After eventually cursing out the management for the endless verbal abuse they heaped upon drivers, I ran out of car services to work for, my new support network now fully set up and engaged. Shelly-world had gone completely toxic, so no more draw there, and school was beginning in a few months—an undergraduate program in criminal justice at one of the best schools in the country. That would lead to a new life and world and possibly a P.I. career, but for certain

I'd be moving into the city to attend classes, a place I always knew I'd one day have to live. There I was set up to dorm in a tiny furnished room at the artsy-crafty, kinda' Jewish Ninety-second Street Y, which would help lead to an acting career. Either way, whichever track developed fastest, my 'recovery' from 'relapse' in cult speak and the second-rate Long Island, gym-rat, gigolo-car service driver days were behind me. Even the probation term for that second handgun bust was winding down, so all the signs were clear and pointed in the same direction, a new life up ahead.

The head counselor

By late June '94, I was already back on wheels. No more classy BMW coupé, perfectly customized motorcycle, or cube van/motorhome. These days, it was more like a cream-colored, rusty heap of an ancient Buick LeSabre two-door jalopy. I put a rear windshield decal of the iconic eye of the Egyptian god Horus on to dress her up and announce to the world, sad as she may look to you, this babe is mine, and I love her. The AM/FM radio worked, so did the heat, the lights, the windshield wipers, the signals—everything. So, she passed inspection, was registered and insured, and gratefully, I called her my ride. I babied her, my \$175 investment, bought from a fellow cabbie, and she took care of me. Every day I'd open the hood, twist off the air filter, and pour a capful of gasoline right into her carburetor to get her started. After that,

she did her job, and I appreciated her for it. Every gently driven successful ride was a blessing.

Normally it was for the route previously described, all in all maybe a five-to-ten-mile diameter, but this trip up to the Adirondacks was really going to put her to the test. With that in mind, my waiting camp counselor job at Somerhill in Athol, New York, I bought her a new fuel filter so the gasoline-into-the-carburetor routine was retired, balanced and inflated the tires, checked the fluids, filled her with high octane, said my last friendly goodbyes to Gino and Mae, then turned over the ignition and headed north from Nassau to Warren County, slow and steady, reaching my destination over two hundred miles away without so much as a cough or a sneeze.

The campus was laid out on absolutely stunning grounds: roughly twenty acres on a steep and high hilltop in the quiet hamlet of Athol, bordered by an ancient, almost stagnant lake nested on the far edge, the towering Adirondack peaks to the north and west and a lazy, meandering country road to the south, framed by impenetrably thick forest on both opposing sides. The peaceful mile or two's drive, off and above the closest county road, another mile or two beyond the closest state road, the grounds of Camp Somerhill alone were reason enough for me to want to be there. The population density drops from that of a crowded New York City suburb to that of a rural landscape of farms, lakes, mountains, valleys, and

fields dotted by the occasional trailer park, strip mall, and small town housing developments, i.e., plenty of breathing room for a boy bred in Brooklyn. Although I'm hardly any type of geography expert, for my tank of gas, the Adirondacks are the most compelling range in all of the eastern seaboard—almost six million protected acres of forests, lakes, rivers, caves, and wildlife, that includes the Catskills, the Alleghenies, the Poconos, the White and the Green. The Bark-eaters have them all beat. Thank you, T.R. *Bully!*

The camp infrastructure, though—the buildings and sporting arenas, the bunks, basketball and handball courts, the mess hall, stage, barn, and corrals—were visibly worn down and in dangerous decline. Somerhill's heyday was the seventies, when the revolutionary Age of Aquarius degraded into the feel-good disco and crystal '*I'm Okay, You're Okay*' nihilism settled into popular culture. By the time I got there, that '*weltanschauung*' looked and felt not only dated but downright ludicrous, if not poisonous. Notwithstanding any of that, Somerhill was still the great Larry Singer's vision, naming his camp after that experimental British school that preached and practiced a hands-off policy towards the often troubled students, allowing them to '*discover*' themselves unfettered by the imposition of the rigid forms like rules, grades, and the expectations of conventional schooling. I can see the appeal, and even how it might work well in just the

right circumstances, but it didn't work very well here, at least not in my eyes, at least not by the time I got there in the early nineties. But that was what I had to deal with, where Mr. Singer's well-intentioned fantasy met the chaos of a complex reality.

To wit, unlike the first two summer camps I attended as a kid, there was no set schedule of activities in the camp. There was a reveille, meal times, and lights out after taps, but between them, it was a free-for-all. Anyone could do whatever they wanted activity-wise, and there was no structural breakdown according to campers' ages or sexes, which made a counselor's life pretty easy. And that was what I was hired to be: a simple counselor, guiding activities as my interests directed me, which in this case meant the drama department where we'd put on weekly plays, and chaperoning the kids while outside the grounds on field trips, like our weekly roller skating outings in Lake George and amusement park trips in Warrensburg.

Yeah, not a bad gig, and at the end of which I'd get a nice fat check to bring with me when I moved into the city to begin my first semester as an undergraduate, fully detached from the cobwebs and quagmire of my descent into that Long Island life, where I had been living in shameful, often painful penance and low-end output, paying off the psychic debt accrued due to my earlier two-year term of debauchery, reckless disregard, and abandon, i.e., the 'relapse.'

As it turned out, except for the great Larry Singer, a man whose legendary greatness he would personally attest to at every given and often spontaneous opportunity, and who in fact, as a well-regarded Brooklyn public high school physical education teacher, coach, and a charismatic camp owner did have his day, and another older colleague of his, probably a retired educator and co-owner, I was the oldest male on staff on the scene, approximately ten years older than the average employee. That, combined with my magnetic and engaging personality (I'm told) brought about a significant shift in the dynamic, possibly a course-correction on the third or fourth night after all the campers had arrived and the bunks were basically full, roughly one hundred and twenty kids in total spanning the ages from as young as seven or eight up until about twelve or thirteen. Now, in keeping with the Somerhill philosophy, a lot of these kids were the 'troubled' type who were either kicked out of other camps or never even made it past the first screening interview, so Somerhill was just about their last hope for a camping experience in the woods all summer, and the great Larry's doors were open with exactly them in mind. In other words, a recipe for anarchy in the woods where state trooper response time could be clocked in hours.

It was that night when the *Lord of the Flies* model of cohabitation replaced the *I'm Okay, You're Okay* model, and something short of all hell broke loose. Just after taps blew over the campus loudspeakers the oldest boys, the eleven and

twelve-year-olds, decided they didn't feel like retiring right then and that it would be more fun to run amok flaunting their passion for chaos and lawlessness instead. I got it, of course, but *Kabbo* wasn't having it. Larry and his co-owner were quickly overwhelmed by the herd of ten to fifteen boys as they helplessly tried to restore decorum by calling for obedience, but of course, for the boys, it wasn't at all about decorum and certainly not obedience; it was about fun, chaos, and rebellion. So his words were used as ammunition with which to echo back shouts of ridicule while they ran around in primitive, ecstatic reverie, hooping and hollering as they pounded on bunk outer walls and knocking over whatever they could, such as outdoor furniture and sports equipment like volleyball nets and tetherball poles, before heading to the girls' bunks for a 'raid'.

After taking all this in for about twenty seconds, noticing the shameful impotence of the two past-their-prime camp directors, I flew into action. Once the full picture sank in, particularly the impotence, though it was totally unplanned and automatic, I took off like a crazed banshee into the center of the mobilized young mob, the eye of the storm, grabbing the closest ones by their shirt collars and spinning them around to direct the party back toward their respective bunks, all the while growling like an animal warning of an impending attack, using strategically chosen profanity and guttural language meant to convey a sense of urgency and determined command. The idea was to make it clear that testing me would

bring a significant cost that none of them was at all interested in or prepared for, wanting them to believe and feel that I was actually unhinged and capable of hurting someone. I wasn't. It was ninety percent bluff, an acting gig, but that ten percent got the job done.

From one subgroup to another, even as they scattered away from me, I kept up the chase, grabbing their shirt collars and shoulders firmly but not brutally, and turning them in the intended direction with an assortment of deliberately chosen and directly delivered "*Now get the fuck inside*"s and "*Lights out. Time to shut your mouths*" until they all got the message, which took only minutes, two or three at most. Spoiled as they were by their "*I'm okay - you're okay*" indulgent parents and even softer schools, it was the last thing they expected. Consequently, as I had taken on the role of Ralph, in place of the conch, confiscating a professional set of nunchaku from one of the boys, the rest of the summer was smooth.

As of that, I became the de facto 'head counselor' right then and there, never to be challenged or tested again. Even the great Larry Singer was impressed. It was necessary; otherwise, it would have gotten worse, and the success, even by a modest standard, of the entire summer's camping experience was at stake. This I recognized from my own life. I hadn't at all planned for this added responsibility or signed on for it, but it happened. The season at Somerhill ended up being one of the great summers of my life; most of the kids

ended up loving me. Add to that the blonde-haired, thirty-year-old Equestrian Director with the trim frame and big boobs who became my nighttime companion in the privacy of the worn-down but functional trailer in the woods I claimed as my personal and exclusive living space; it was a perfect two months.

As one of the two drama counselors, I shared the privilege of producing and directing these kids in about four plays, while my partner, a lady school teacher from the city and also a drama enthusiast, took on the other four. So, we each produced one once every two weeks, one week on, one off. Hers were a lot more complicated than mine, maybe even musicals; it's vague, but they were just as good as mine or better, which made for a very healthy creative competition.

My strategy was to announce 'auditions' or 'tryouts' for the new week's show in the chow hall during lunch, telling the campers we'd be meeting at the stage as soon as the meal was over. Invariably, at least twenty kids of all ages would show up, seated quietly on the stones and logs that served as audience seating in front of the outdoor stage, all wanting to be in the show, even the littlest ones who barely understood what was going on. They just knew they wanted to be part of something all the other kids seemed excited about. It was adorable, and impossible to turn any of them away.



"It's not the end of the world!" - Cochise, Camp Somerhill, July, 1994

Here's what I did: I'd choose a story taken from one of the classic *Twilight Zone* episodes and tell it to them, no script. I could never write and expect them to learn a script in a week, so forget that. I'd just tell them the story with as much detail as necessary to give them the essential picture, explaining who each character was and take them through it scene by scene. There were only maybe three or four characters who had to be cast right, or as close as it could be, so for those roles they really did have to 'audition.' I would tell them about the scene again, who does what, how it begins, and how it ends, then let them improvise it for me, using their natural dialogue, timing, and innate creativity. All kids know how to play 'make-believe', which is pretty much what theater actually is,

so I took it for what it was and made it simple enough and a lot of fun. Everyone else I made extras. They could all be in it, giving a little time to each one so they knew how important their ‘action’ was, and as far as I could tell, they were all thrilled and took it very, very seriously, again, totally adorable. One of the older girls, maybe eleven or twelve, could sing, another camper could play the piano, so I added a scene just to showcase them and somehow worked it into the story. Again,



pretty easy and a lot of fun. We rehearsed twice a day, once after lunch and again after dinner, so by showtime, Saturday night, everyone was comfortable and

having a great time, and the performance, much to my surprise and delight, was better than any of the practices. We led off with that one with Anne Francis, about the mannequin who forgets she’s a mannequin brought to life once a year for a day, terrifying and unforgettable. Well, on curtain call, they rose to the occasion and knocked it out of the park, all of them, and I was a proud papa who gave these kids something cool to do and remember having done.

Added to that, those weekend outings in the school bus that almost wasn't, which would often break down on the road to and from the skating rink or the movie theater or wherever we happened to be. I was supposed to be the driver and took the time and trouble to pass the road test for a CDL while still back in Oceanside, so I had the permit to drive that classic, yellow 60-seater with a fully licensed driver on board and was scheduled to take the road test up there in Warrensburg, which never happened. The night before, a couple of the younger counselors used the parked rig to party in, left the lights on so in the morning the battery was dead. Road test canceled. I could still drive it but only with the great and mystical, grand and exalted Larry Singer next to me who had the proper license. We'd be turning off and heading up this gargantuan hill, the one that led to the camp off the last county road, and like at the helm on M.C. Fox (Volume II), he'd be yelling right into my ear inches from his lips: "*GAS! GAS! Give it GAS!!*" Meaning we needed the momentum to even begin to make it up the hill, but it was crazy dangerous, this was no sports car, no power anything, if I made that turn at that speed and there was anything coming at us from the opposite way which would only be discovered when it was too late to change course, or slow down, well, goodnight Irene. So, I did the best I could and we made it up those hills and at a reasonable pace, until of course, the time when we broke down about halfway up. That's when the kids would go nuts, yelling and screaming

and laughing and having a ball at the misfortune and unexpected delay.

There was this one skinny, little Afro-American kid, his parents named *Cochise*. He was one of the youngest kids, six or seven, and seemed to have no idea that he, a) was different, i.e., black, when except for a handful everyone else was white or Asian, and b) wasn't an adult. Since he had no brothers and sisters and was surrounded by adults at home all the time, he acted more like an adult than the usual seven-year-old. It was hysterical. None of that registered to him; it was great. I used to lift him up by the wrists and carry him around suspended in the air, announcing to all who witnessed, "*For just pennies a day you can help feed a poor, starving African child!*" Then, I'd put him down on the ground and say, "*Hey! Let's have a Tickle party! You're the guest of honor!*" and start tickling while he kicked and laughed. After which, whenever he saw me he became my shadow, imitating me by repeating with hysterics: "*For just pennies a day.. For just pennies a day..*" I don't think he even understood the rest; probably no idea what "a starving African child" was or meant or why I thought it was funny. Anyway, back on the bus that almost wasn't, once we were broken down, as soon as the realization hit the passengers that dinner was going to be served late, among the moaning and groaning, he'd start promenading up and down the aisle, announcing his sage advice: "*It's not the end of the world! It's not the end of the world,*" which became his default tag-line.

Of course, a few of the oldest girls kinda' liked me, just before the teenage range, the alpha male daddy, so I did what I always do in this type of fairly common sensitive situation: I give everyone the impression that I kinda' like them too, but now is not the time. Someday? Sure. *Wunderbar*, love it. But not this day. Until then, once a week I'd buy one of those king-sized Hershey chocolate bars, enter their bunk in the early evening, after chow but before the evening activity, and announce who the week's lucky winner was, and accompany it with some sort of gentle teasing, like when one of them had a missing front baby tooth, I'd put my finger where it would have been in my mouth while making the candy bar announcement, but aside that made no reference to it, and every week it was a different girl. They loved it, thought it was special, and I guess, in a way, it was. That way, everyone's happy, no one feels rejected, and I don't get in trouble for being criminally insane. And of course, I had Kim, the riding counselor, with my hands happily full with her, and her young son at the camp, and her big, slobbering, shedding, goofy Golden Retriever or whatever breed of mutt it was who she brought along to join us out there in the bed of my trailer; crowded but cozy, and I mean out there as in pretty deep in the woods, a good ten minutes' stroll down a steep dirt hill path from the rest of the campus, which itself was just outside the middle of nowhere, out there with the coyotes, owls, and bears, not to mention the legendary ax-wielding Cropsey

Maniac, down by the dying lake over-populated with roaring bullfrogs and silent, slithering snakes.

Kim was another soon-to-be but not-yet divorcee who wanted to tie me up, and I'm not sure for exactly what because I didn't let her, but it was something she wanted to light candles for as atmosphere. No. Not this time. Not in a trailer, alone, deep in the woods. Not anytime soon either. But who knows? It might have been fun, so I told her we could continue, but only after the divorce, and with that, except for a gift she sent me a few weeks later, a book of poetry, that last discussion was our final scene together. Anyhow, on the last day of camp, after the summer lovers said their goodbyes, and as the kids were packed up and being picked up, a last few came down to the trailer to say goodbye to Rob, the head counselor and theater director, one or two of the older girls who handed me notes with their addresses, the little boy who asked me to make sure his tie was on straight for the play, that kinda' thing. It felt like my heart was being torn out of my chest, slowly, literally, an emotional intensity I never even remotely anticipated. I can't really describe the agony any better than that, except to admit that on the ride back down to Long Island, with my still-trusty rusty chariot, I cried like a two-year-old stuck with a safety pin all the way from Lake George to at least Albany. Seriously, right through the toll booths, I didn't care who saw. Yes, this time it felt like the world had ended, Cochise. That much pain. By the time I made it back down to Nassau County, my loyal, comfy Buick

making the round trip, and I shook off the pain, saw it was now true; that world and everything that came before had come to an end. Sad but not sorry, a summer for the books, a sui generis moment of life was over, and a new one in the world's greatest city, the center of the known universe, was just about to begin.

Chapter X: *One of the cool people*

It just worked out that way. I tried to be cool, probably up until that stint in '82-3 up in Erie County, but after that? I let that charade go—all the nonsense, who I imagined other people imagined I was, the whole mirage—so it wasn't at all about that. It was about hustle, something I could sink my teeth into and give my all for; all 'A-game' all the time. That's what drove me, so naturally, as form follows function, it was a lot of fun, and they paid me. What else could one ask for? A Zionist plot for global domination? A trip to the moon? Mars? “*A baby's arm holding an apple*”? Thanks (The Tubes), but no thanks. I'll stick with keeping myself comfortable in my little world and be happy with that. You saviors, dominators, liberators and executioners can do your thing. As for me? I just want the next gig.

Okay, so, where are we? Let's say it's nineteen-ninety-nine, and I just graduated from school, *cum laude*, which tells people I was really into it, and I was. Now, the time came for your professors to give you names and inside contacts that would help get you started on the career, like working retail security for Pinkertons or a big insurance company hiring guys to do the investigative legwork.

In addition to using prestigious John Jay faculty members as references, there is also a very exclusive professional society, ASIS (the American Society for Industrial Security), which was holding its annual convention at the Javits Center very soon. A ticket for admission offered direct contact with many of the main players in that industry, all there to pitch their wares—surveillance equipment, non-lethal force devices, bug detectors, state-of-the-art security systems and software, the works. You could meet them, introduce yourself, maybe make an impression live and in person, and if nothing else? You walk away with a contact. It's likely the whole graduating class in that department, around fifty students, got these passes, and I was no exception. So, off I went in my best springtime business casual—the khakis, collared blue shirt and loose tie and loafers look—and headed out to meet my destiny on that path.

Although I'd been a union member since ninety-seven, aside from all that extra work, I was still pretty inexperienced on the acting track as far as professional gigs go—meaning actual characters with speaking roles. But I had enough combined experience with all of it, the whole industry, the professional community, and in the context of the rest of my day-to-day existence, to realize that to a very significant extent, it, life, was all an act, as in “*all the world's a stage...*” where, to a meaningful degree, we can, and do, choose our roles. So, besides the ‘*struts and frets*’, what are you going to do with

your allotted ‘*hour upon the stage*’? Become a doctor? A lawyer? An Indian chief? Maybe an independent trucker? An outlaw? Convict? Policeman? Shoe salesman? Actor? Make a choice and make it happen. That’s the program.

Armed with that insight, flashing my pass, I entered through the maze of security barriers set up in the hotel lobby, then up the escalators and through the long, quiet, carpeted, and surveilled corridors, and finally into the main ballroom—or showcase—a huge two-story spread where hundreds of guys and dozens of ladies seemed to be having a blast. It was like a mega family reunion of former, current, and retired law enforcement types, military and civilian, meeting new and old friends, exchanging cards, laughter, and back slaps—a good ol’ boy network of guys who had been in the trenches together, often literally.

Right away, it felt as if I was on a set but miscast in the scene, juggling competing and conflicting urges; ‘*This is cool, I’d like to be a part of it,*’ along with ‘*What exactly am I doing here? This isn’t me. I’m not a real tough guy, never really was, and I don’t aspire to be either any more.*’ That phase of my personal drama was wrapped up in Erie County. By the end of the two- or three-hour session, thrilling as it was at times and in places, my ‘protector’ and ‘justice’ instincts excited, upon exiting the venue, the clearest call from deep within, that unfiltered, inner voice whispered: ‘*You don’t belong here. You*

are best suited as the art gallery opening type, or scaring Russell Crowe, or one of Josh Brolin's 'dirty detectives' shaking down a drug dealer for Ridely Scott, on a film set or on stage. You are a creative performer, i.e., an actor.' This convention was for real. Big difference. It just wasn't me anymore, the role was way too confining, and dangerous, and usually thankless, if it ever even was anything more than an old act, and as an act, that meant I was already an actor. So, might as well, given the opportunity, do it professionally, get paid for that, play 'tough guy' with prop guns and make-believe blood.

Of course, I could have made it *me*. I wasn't an independent trucker either until I made myself one, an honor's student, or really an actor. I could do the same here, no doubt. It's just a different scene with its own set of puzzles to solve. It could be done; it's not an MIT scholarship, an NFL contract, or the Navy SEALs, but not without a complete lifestyle commitment and a lot of work—especially considering the rap-sheet 'baggage' being dragged along with me. Three felonies? Two for guns? It would mean sacrificing just about everything else to achieve any kind of satisfying success here. And once a choice is made, like getting my degree, it's all out until it's done. So, choosing wisely is not just advisable, it's essential.

In its place, just as I considered before I began this particular journey almost five years earlier, at least I earned a college degree and got that certificate—not bad stuff or any type of waste of time, but what I really wanted was already right in front of me. That's what I needed to drill down on and keep plugging away at. Just go for that and leave the real thing for the real guys, the guys who were much better suited for the ASIS role than the optometrist's son who didn't learn the first time. So that's what I did.

The schools

As they say: you work with what you have, and in Manhattan? There's a lot to work with. If you want to raise corn, or climb mountains, or mine for gold, Manhattan's not your place, but if you want a career as a camera, film, or TV, or stage actor, that you can't really do much better than the Grand Manana outside of Hollywood, which after my legendary west is the best sojourn back in '77-8 (see Vol. I), I was well over that coast. Better still, there's no place like home where many of the top performing arts and film schools and film departments in the top liberal arts schools like NYU, NYFA, SVA, Juilliard, and Columbia in the world are based, and they all need actors, often the young just starting out, where everyone can more readily fit on the same page together. You can start with a pay-to-play place like Actors Connection or HB Studio

and start earning stripes that way, or go straight to the budding careers of young student filmmakers just gaining their first, serious experience behind the lens. Because I understood I had to transform, to become an actor one must do what actors do, one must lead an actor's life, so I did both. By the time I was ready to read for students and their classmates and professional instructors, doing classroom projects, or even thesis, I had some type of clue. Though I never heard "*Teeth!*" again, I knew what '*take your mark*', '*take two beats*', and '*slate for the camera*' meant and how much work was involved in getting '*off book*'. Believe me, when you have a seventeen-page script, and ninety-percent of the lines are yours, spaced over five or six scenes or more like I often did, those lines don't get sealed in your head by magic, or by taking a pill. You have to drive them in, slowly, deliberately, over and over and over, and again, and keep them there, accessible right up until they yell "*Action!*" and that means days and days and nights and nights of preparation, carrying that highlighted, dog-eared and paper-clipped script around in my pocket for days and days including on '*the day*' like it was a sacred totem, and often requiring the aid of a script coach (usually one of my neighbors drafted for the project in exchange for a highly prized IMDb credit negotiated on their behalves with the producers). Even when not making 'perfect,' practice is indispensable. I've seen the pros, like on *Law and Order* just show up on the day, get handed the '*sides*' (a section of a script) twenty minutes before they shoot the

scene, and they get to work on and deliver it right away, no sweat and right on time. Of course, it's only a two or three-page scene at a time, but in my case, well, as I said, it was often quite a bit more, and though I was getting paid it wasn't the big bucks, these were mainly non-union gigs (I'll explain that later) but it was exactly what I signed on for, so I got it done, and the schools sure helped. All except Columbia. I'd done multiple for all the other schools over the years, almost all paid and for certain all valuable, but Colombia? The elite-iest of them all? Barely a nod. I'd be invited up, do my audition, then I'd either never get a call, or the deal in the making would fall apart before launching. To my mind? A glaring omission. Wasn't I Columbia material? My three notes not played well enough? Come on, guys. What gives? You're not gonna get Russell Crowe or Harvey Keitel. Call me. Put me in the game.

Of course, what you want out of this exercise is not only the experience and a token payment just to show your input is worth some type of sacrifice (*Can you swing \$100 a day?*), but getting that material, the finished product for your 'reel', an actor's calling card: This is me, this is what I can bring. This is not a sales pitch. This is the demonstration of the product. That's invaluable. You can't fake that. It's a "*don't tell me, show me*" business. And you have to push for it, from inception (the will to create one, often requiring chasing, threatening, and cajoling the students to make good on their

agreement to provide it) to final execution (using it effectively to do what it is intended for, book gigs).

“Who’s on first?” Me! First lead

The casting notice read something about the lead role in an SVA thesis project: they wanted a very large man to play the cliché role of the older, hard-boiled, cynical police chief, a sort of fatherly role, like maybe Ed Asner. Early on, I told myself to ignore the character breakdowns. They usually reflected lazy, unimaginative routine thinking substituting for the harder work creativity requires, meaning I might still be able to work with it if I can get myself in that door, so I submitted all five-foot-nothing of myself.

Welp, sure enough, I got an invite to the school for the coming Friday night where I would be reading for the role of *Chief Barnes*. As soon as I walked in the smaller classroom door, I saw the filmmaker, Matt, the twenty-something graduating student light up. He liked what he saw, *Chief Barnes*, a little guy with a good build, gruff voice, and a mug that suggested all the confidence and cynicism he was looking for. Next, the money shot, could I pull it off convincingly from the script, and maybe even with some added unscripted, personal flair? Welp, again. I killed it. After one or two simple but necessary adjustments, knocked it right oughta’ da park on the next

swing. I knew it. Why did he have to be big? Why 'big' physically? Is he a linebacker? A heavyweight pro-wrestler? What they wanted was something physically distinctive to add dimension to the character, and the force to drive it home. Wallah! Here I am, Big Rob.

So we shot. For three days and nights, interiors and exteriors (his parents put up some serious bread), I was the man, one of the cool people under the lights. At the end of every semester's run, the school screens all the thesis projects on the big silver one, a full-sized commercial movie theater about ten minutes' walk from the main campus on West 23rd. It was like a big-time premiere, probably hundreds of attendees, everybody's grandma', grandpa', parents, and cousins, and friends, the entire graduating class, more than one hundred students. And there I was! Up there. One of the stars! I even had my own entourage and videographer! Unreal. One minute I'm doing the graveyard shift in the suburban car service hump and here I am now, in the city, living my dream, it's coming together, a crazy moment of surreality.

***No, I shan't be doing that. Nope. None of that.
Thanks anyway.***

In every living seed, there's a dormant forest, right? Every student was a seed, every professor, and damn near every

other point of human contact in these learning academies held promise. Aside from an actual film shoot gig, there were even more opportunities to be discovered and worked with. Among them, The School of Visual Arts (SVA) regularly hired actors at the usual rate of \$10 an hour to come in and help out with classroom work. They might need a scene shot, read, or just performed; the student writers and directors needed actors to help them see their work come alive, and then be better able to make adjustments.

There'd be no auditions for these gigs; you just got your name registered on the list of available actors and waited for the call, and since you're doing about a million things at once, this is no big deal, it's just one of the million. Once a call came in, although the business end was formalized in advance, work eligibility-wise, tax IDs, Social Security numbers, whatever was necessary, the works, we'd only get the scripts right before show time, a half-hour at most. Just after signing in to the premises, finding the classroom and being handed them, we'd be seated outside the active classrooms in the hallways or stairwells doing quick run-throughs again and again and again, like the big-time pros, trying to get a fast clue, basically winging it, but it worked. That kind of pressure fuels pros and comes with the gigs, so it's no surprise.

In general, and the best part, while making the classroom event happen, we met a lot of young, serious and upcoming filmmakers and maybe even impressed the teaching staff too, who were always working on some project outside school they'd need 'talent' for, if not the current one then maybe the next. Who knows what today might lead to, or when and how the next seed might sprout? Anything might happen in this creative playing field of ever-shifting and infinite variables. You just need to make yourself one of the players and in the right position and stick around, head up. And it was fun. And we got paid. We might even get some usable video for our reels meaning any time that call came in? I was psyched. It was a professional acting gig, which doesn't grow on trees or get handed out like Christmas gifts from Santa. No, it's a very, very tough market, with thousands of actors competing for dozens of jobs. So what's not to like?

The essential 'I'm not homophobic' card

He introduced himself as John Strong, a student at SVA who "discovered" me a couple of years earlier at one of those classroom exercises. He said he was shooting a music video for a well-known rock band and had a role he thought would be perfect for me, if I was interested. You know how some say when it rains it pours? Well, just as this sudden invitation came in, for his proposed dates I happened to have already

been scheduled to shoot a lead role in a major budget short film in Montreal produced by the government-sponsored media company named “SODEC,” the “Société de développement des entreprises culturelles” or in English: *Society for the Development of Cultural Enterprises*. A big deal. More about that project which ended me up promoting it at Cannes in 2013 (not at an almost Cannes Film Festival theater down the road somewhere in Cannes, but in the main house, its heart, the one with the big red carpet descending down the wide stairway from the upper levels, the iconic *palais*). But, because of that schedule conflict, despite how flattering the offer was, and another even more germane consideration, I had to politely turn him down. That other consideration? He broke it down for me over the phone: it opens at a roadside strip club (so far, so good) where two guys, patrons, collide. One of these men is an older, straight gentleman, there to enjoy himself the way those in that class do, booze and broads forever, and the other, a young gay man who habitually cruises strip joints in search of straight men to seduce. To wit, he sports a black eye. Sometimes his gambit works, other times, not so well, and ends up frustrated and injured. But he can't help himself, it's his thing, the thrill, the hunt, the risk. This particular night, wherein I am the subject of his interest, it ends up with us kissing, passionately. *Can you do that, Rob? Uh, no sir. I cannot tell a lie. Yes, I chopped down that cherry tree and no, I cannot kiss a man like I would a woman. Nope. No can do. Thank you for asking, but I am*

already booked that week anyway. Thanks again, and break legs on the shoot. Goodbye.

A few days later he called again. He's willing to change the date until I'm done in Montreal and change the script: *"Can you handle a blow job?" "Pitcher or catcher? The former's a negative, the latter's a possible." "Catcher. Rob, let's meet for lunch by the Film Center and talk about it over burgers and brews."* *"Okay."*

That Sunday, at the cool people's Five Napkins on the corner of Ninth and 45th Street, where all around us many of the working pros are concentrated while relaxing, we talked. The artsy-looking, trim and bespectacled young man told me that he had me in mind for this as soon as he saw me back then, he was just waiting for the time to come, graduation, thesis project time, and here it was. It had to be me. And he offered a very reasonable day's pay to boot, and all I have to do is hang out in a strip bar, with live strippers and be willing to fake getting a blow job from a dude. Hey! With all that, plus it's my requisite *I'm not homophobic bona fides* calling card, everyone in New York needs at least one, so I agreed.

The video took off, nearing a million views. Naturally, it's well-shot, with a great song, and if I don't say so myself, the two (straight) actors pulled it off, pardon the pun. I think it

sells, and so did the director. He even won some awards with it. At the end of the one-night shoot, and after he added a generous tip to the pay, and a few exchanges about the editing in post (he went with his instincts, not mine, deciding between takes), I never heard from the lad again.

You might have thought success would build on success, as in Scorsese, De Niro, and Keitel, but in my case, my experience, taken as a whole, I'd have to say not. At least not in that particular way. One of the strippers? Yes, she was so hellfire hot, petite, and industry-savvy, that I went looking for her at the Hell's Kitchen (gay) bar where she told me she worked as a hostess and server. Man, I was ready. But I couldn't seem to get her fire lit. I mean, she greeted me with a warm hug and sat with me when she could, but when I asked for her number or offered to escort her home after work, I got back a sort of blank stare. So after two or three tries, well, it's New York, and there are literally hundreds of thousands of beautiful, talented, and at least somewhat available girls to go after, score with or get turned down by, so it makes no sense to get stuck on any one of them. If she seems promising? She's at the top of the list. It's all about her. But once that fades, replaced by a lukewarm or tentative response, or undeniable rejection, no matter how hot and promising she may first appear, she ends up in the 'forget about it' file, just another of the untold millions of girls we never score with, most of whom we quickly forget. It's only after that first magic kiss, if

and when it happens, that things get sticky. I kissed a girl selling sandwiches on the beach in Rio, Copacabana, and for the rest of the trip, no matter the availability and willingness of, let's say dozens, if not hundreds of available ladies, couldn't get past her, who I also never scored with; that magic, poisonous kiss. Without that? You just face the hard facts and as quickly as you can, then turn the page.

And no, I never heard from the lad again either, or Matt, or any of the other budding young filmmakers I shot with after the day or days, no matter how successful the project, and there are quite a few of them, those projects, and consequently some really, really nice work out there I'm a part of. They want to move on and up, I get it. But I do have these videos as a reminder of exactly what it was I did in life during those years, and it makes me smile to see and know that I went for something challenging even with the built-in relentless competition, no gimmes there, and despite all that, the long odds and regular rejection, achieved much of it. That's showbiz too.

The Ninja Burglar

Some time around the year 2000, three years into the union, the only time I can recall ever booking a gig from purchasing those illicitly commandeered breakdowns was a doozy. It

practically made up for all the time, money, and effort spent trying for gigs I'd never even be seen for, let alone booked through that desperado channel. It read something to the effect that they were looking for a short man who could pass as a ninja burglar and play the piano. Hello! Now that we've narrowed it down to a hungry half million, I'd get my chance. If you recall, those hijacked breakdowns are only supposed to go to the agents that subscribe to them and pay the monthly fee, and need to be recognized publicly as industry pros in order to receive them. And *pro forma*, it's only their submissions that casting directors call talent in. If you just show up, as me and my crew often did, you will not likely be seen, and very likely be labeled an industry pain-in-the-ass, which is not good. It's a tough spot, choices need to be made, risks taken, and followed up on. With all that baked in, I looked at the breakdown one more time, copied down the address, printed up a résumé, and affixed it to the back of my black and white 8x10 and showed up as if life was exactly as it was supposed to be and I'd been invited.

Fortunately, it was a somewhat hastily thrown-together audition in a downtown rented space by a production company for FOX Entertainment and, as occasionally is the case, seemed a bit informal with regards to all that protocol, especially so when it's not a formal casting department or outside agency holding the auditions, but the production team itself is doing it on their own. Once I walked in, handed my

paperwork to the assistant taking them, she barely looked at it, just telling me to have a seat and wait to be called. So far, so good. Next thing you know I'm in the room and the young, all-business, female director in her thirties, looking at the résumé where I had listed *Bucks Rock* as a sort of summer stage credit, (see Volume I) which she recognized right away and confirmed with me, “*You went there? What years?*” “*Yes, I did. Way back in the early seventies.*” With that, I was dismissed. That was the entire audition. By the time I got back home, the phone had already rung, they left a message to call them back, I was booked and we needed to lock in the dates.



Holy NINJA SWORD

SWALLOWER, BATMAN! I'M ON FIRE! A gig! I'm not sure if they specified 'principal' or not, but I knew it wasn't background. It was a real role, a paid, professional network gig! And I booked it on my own and without even a formal audition. Yes! But, it was not a union gig, that was for sure; the pay would be barely 20% of a union day-player rate, with no perks. Given all that, exactly why I took it isn't clear; it

might have been a ‘reality TV reenactment’ clause that exempted it from Golden Rule #1. Or, more likely, it might be that since I never took seriously the idea I might actually book it, then did, decided I’d just go with the momentum. And, and, and, I hadn’t been vested yet, so there was no pension to worry about losing.

Fast forward to the day, now on set. She’s there with her team, the trim brunette with the dark eyeglass frames and *de rigueur* black turtleneck; they have no idea it’s my first professional speaking gig, and I’m doing my best to keep them from finding out. It shouldn’t be too difficult because there’s no script, and no one told me anything about lines, so I just changed into the supplied ninja wardrobe, including a black face mask and samurai sword, and stood on my mark waiting for direction. She had already told me the scene; the rich old lady is lounging supine on her elevated canopy, on “*Action!*” I enter the bedroom gripping the blade upright to frighten her, hold a beat, then quickly dash and leap up onto the bed to relieve her of her diamond bracelet. Easy enough, right? After it’s been removed, just repeat the action in reverse, back down off the bed and out of the room. Easy as a day on the beach! Okay. Ready, ready. “*ACTION!*” I enter the bedroom (the camera frame) then stop for a beat or two to evaluate the boudoir scene, how high I’ll have to leap and what, if any, obstacles may hinder me, like any witnesses that might need hacking, that sort of pause, then with a hint of frustration, she

calls out: “*Say something!*” as if I was supposed to know in advance to do that, which in official practice required the absent ‘under five’ contract even under AFTRA terms, a ‘bump’, but here we are now, so, let's go: “*Good evening, Mrs. Skelly!*” followed by the sure-footed dash and leap. Before rolling camera, I spent time practicing the removal of the bracelet so that while we were shooting it didn't have to look clumsy; the burglar's a pro, but believe me, unclasping it quickly was, until I got it just right. On my way out, now with the jewels in hand, before exiting the room, I turned back around towards her, and at my own direction made a quick, deferential bow before completing my exit. In another scene, I'm one of her employees in a dinner jacket entertaining party guests with a bit of very, very off-key, hollow-sounding keyboard banging from some junkyard reject wreck of an upright they had on set, and with all that, that was a wrap! When a month or two later, the night came? Showtime? There I was on the small screen, but all over America in prime time on Fox's *Million Dollar Mysteries* in all my dark, ninja glory, albeit my face covered by that black mask. But you could hear me and my distinctive voice, and that leap looked positively Olympic, and it felt as if the mark I was determined to leave on this earth in that sphere was beginning to really take shape; a gentleman ninja burglar had made the TV scene.

A Day in The Park with “Big Daddy” (1999)

Just around the same time, a very busy time in Gotham, Sylvia Faye's office called me about an Adam Sandler gig. He was in town shooting a feature, with lots of location shots around the city. They needed background for most of those scenes, and the director needed a stand-in for a scene he cast himself in—a cameo. For those who may not be aware, a stand-in on film sets is an actor about the same build, height, weight, and coloring as the principal actor. They use the stand-in to set the shot up, adjust the lights, sound, blocking (character movement), and camera locations while the cast actor is off-set preparing for the scene. It's a fun gig, with decent union pay, but you have to be very alert at all times—always listening for when they need you and never being far while also never being in anybody's way. You don't want them to have to ask for you twice. When the assistant director calls out, “*Rob! Step in, please,*” you don't even have to say anything; you find your mark and just step in, ears and eyes open. Leave the ego at home and get to work. The set, in particular, is very much a team sport event, and everyone needs to be on point and A-game ready at all times, from sign-in to check-out. It's like that—military precision—and one of the reasons I was so hooked into the industry action.

I'd never met Adam before, or the director, but of course, I knew what Adam looked like. I caught him on SNL a few times, and knew he was hysterical, and another fellow Hebraic Brooklynite, but the director, Dennis Dugan? I had no clue.

Anyway, this particular day we're shooting a scene in Central Park, a ten-minute walk from home base, and the scene involves Adam, a lead female, and one of the two young boys the story's focused on. The background's job is to be enjoying a day in the park, sprawled out on the lawn by one of the concrete ponds, soaking up the warm spring sunlight and fresh city air. Not a tough day's work, but I have a puss on. For some reason, I had been indulging in an unusual slump of self-pity and with my expressive mug, and without holding back, it's easily readable. So, picture me on a movie set in Central Park, on a beautiful spring afternoon, getting paid, eating as much of whatever I want for free, and moping around like it was Christmas morning and I got a bag of coal. There are about twenty or thirty of us scattered about, on blankets, beach towels, throwing frisbees, reading magazines, that sort of thing, when in between takes this middle-aged, gray-haired dude who was busy doing something related to the scene just feet from me, turns to where I'm seated, looks at me and asks, "*What's the matter?*" "*Everybody here's making big money, and I'm only making one hundred and nine dollars a day.*" It's hard to believe I actually said that, but I did, the atrocious entitlement in the New York air infecting me, I suppose. The guy takes it in then responds, "*Yeah, but what a great way to make a hundred and nine dollars!*" Of course, he was dead-on right and it landed even more solidly when on the next break, I saw it was none other than Dugan himself.

That was the last time I ever had any of those thoughts on a film set.

There was another memorable run-in on the set that day, this one was with the funnyman and star of the show himself, Adam Sandler. Later in the same scene, when he and the lead female were positioned very close to my spot, close enough to have a quiet chat without moving, between takes I started talking to him, doing my usual routine with well-known actors that I admire. That is, doing lines of theirs to them as though it's a real conversation, waiting to see how long it takes before they realize my attempt at satiric gaslighting. Adam had recently done a bit on SNL about growing up in Brooklyn with his rebellious Jewish friends who broke into one of their parents' liquor cabinets, stole and drank an entire bottle of Manischewitz, and then wanted to fight everybody. If you don't get what's funny about this, too bad. Anyhow, I started talking to him, looking right at him as though we knew each other from back in Brooklyn and volunteered that I remembered that time when we... and repeated the shtick, deadpan. He's looking right back at me, same deadpan, waiting for me to finish then replies: "*Was that YOU?*" I nod, then with exaggerated concern, "*You got so old...*" I should have known better than to try to mess with a pro. Freakin' hysterical. Now I felt great; this was a fantastic way to earn one hundred and nine dollars, indeed.

Now, the night we were shooting downtown in the Village, another exterior, I'm there to be Dugan's stand-in. But Dugan is at least three or four inches taller, and my coloring is a bit more 'chestnut' than his slightly graying blond, so I dunno what they're gonna say after I'm told to take position, and I'm a bit stressed. They'll give Sylvia grief, and it'll be blamed on me for not being tall enough. Once the call comes in: "*Rob, step in, please,*" and I take position, they don't say a thing. I guess they just worked around it, or it was close enough not to matter, and either way, and as usual, we got it done and stress replaced by relief and gratitude for yet another cool experience I never could have imagined while driving for those miserable Long Island car services.

Technically, a stand-in is considered crew, and by default, all crew members are invited to the wrap party. That said, when word leaked to me about the party at Bowlmor Lanes, and I showed up, not specifically invited, and with a date, once again I was relieved, happily surprised. Instead of the possible "*who invited you?*" snarl at the door, I was welcomed with open arms, the ADs, DPs, grips, 'sparks', sound guys, hair, wardrobe, and makeup folks, the art department, even a handful of other BGs and stand-ins, even the leads themselves. My date? I had prepared her to expect the unexpected, maybe even the opposite of what happened, so she seemed as impressed as I could have hoped. I was one of the cool people there along with Adam and his girlfriend, the

two of them making out by the pins down at the end of one of the darkened alleys. Sadly though, that's all I remember about her, the cute, pierced chick that worked in the Burritoville where I got my local Mexican food, so it's doubtful that she was impressed enough, I never even got a taste of her fresh, young, enchilada. Oh well, that's New York City, just about everybody's a superstar or wannabe superstar, and I was neither, and, once again, that's showbiz.

A moment under the lights with a movie-star

File another one under surreal from just about then. Salma Hayek was the star, i.e., the main cool person, the Queen of Cool herself, and to my eyes, not at all trying to be, *nonplussed*, she just was. Like, you look at her and as you attempt to focus, ask yourself: where should I start? The name of the film was “54”, after the world-famous 70s cooler-than-you New York dance club, a place I knew from years before when I was never cool enough to even try to get in past the red velvet ropes, never even stood online, which I conveniently considered beneath my presumed dignity and prestige. Instead, I hung around just outside with my drunken pals on a night out in the city and made trouble, never being that into disco anyway but definitely always into breaking balls, taunting the club-goers and bouncers while gambling on their tolerance limits and betting just outside them. But that

was a long time before, a different me, a different life. This was a gig, shooting on location, so I was who they told me to be which in this case was a stand-in for one of the leads, i.e., finally cool enough to be there, twenty-five years later.

This particular scene involved the actor I was standing in for (I remember his face but not his name), this time a damn near perfect match (height, weight, age, and coloring), and Ms. Hayek. Their characters were positioned together closely on the dance floor, facing each other while doing dialogue. When they called me to take my mark for a camera rehearsal, I stood in position alone. Everyone else was busy doing their jobs—crew, extras, actors, etc.—but Salma’s stand-in wasn’t there. It wasn’t my problem to solve, so I just remained on my mark, relaxed while waiting for the next development. The next development was Salma herself walking onto set and taking her position, face to face with me. At about 5’2” and maybe 118 lbs., a literally stunning doll with darkly mesmerizing Lebanese eyes, perfect size for me and boobs most men can only dream of, she started rehearsing her dialogue, looking straight at me, a stand-in for her scene partner's character, but deeply into my eyes, while I did everything I was supposed to be doing, which was nothing, nothing at all except being there for her and her character.

There were at least three identifiable, distinct but compatible, and simultaneous realities unfolding here. The first and most

obvious was that of two professional actors working together on a shared project. Got it. The second, two characters helping tell the writer's story via the script and direction, and third, most subtle but piercing, was Salma Hayek and Robert Kabakoff connecting through the presence and senses into one another's beings. Guess which one is permanently etched into the memory of this actor's life as another of the numerous surrealities life presents. That was as close as I ever got to her, a moment under the lights with a movie star, not as close as I would have chosen, were it my script to write but much closer than I ever imagined just a few short, trucking furniture through concrete canyons and high-rise freight elevators years before (Volume II).

Almost the same thing happened a few scenes later, but this time it was with Mike Myers. He's up on a stairway landing looking down at me, deep eye contact, doing his dialogue as though I was the character, an obviously much different vibe, but still, so weird, looking right back into him, as though none of it's real except that at different levels it all is, true and false simultaneously. It felt downright eerie. It was eerie. Showbiz surreal.

More real than surreal; for this I bothered Marisa?

Let's skip ahead to the mid-2000s. He said his film screened at "Cannes." What he didn't say was that it wasn't at the actual festival, at the *Palais des Festival* during the annual industry bash where it needs to be submitted and selected for screening, but at a privately owned theater he rented for the night somewhere outside the action but not far from it in the city of Cannes. He left that part out, and it never occurred to me to ask. All I heard was "*screened at Cannes*," and saw the professionally produced and packaged DVDs of his short film he carried with him. One of my friends and colleagues, a wild New York Jewish chick, Robin Gayle, who was way into the scene—actress, stage, film, camera, performance art, the works, even having a well-paying, stay-alive gig as a Barbara Streisand and Marilyn Monroe impersonator for private parties, a talented lady, and with some serious, upright, natural bazongas to top it off—pardon the pun—had a principal role in it. There, along with the rest of the cast, was her name and image on the DVD case, and with that, I was sold.

Almost immediately after she introduced us one night at a very upbeat industry event, another screening by another filmmaker at the *Producers Club*, he said he wants to put me in his next film! Just like that. I knew it! Sooner or later, I was going to be 'discovered', and here was the man about to do it. For that to have any reality though, and the other part I didn't know, was that he'd have to first be 'discovered' himself, which as of that moment, aside from the parties he wrote

checks for, like that off-site movie theater and unknown talent like Robin, he had not been. But, what did I actually know? Aside from my objective, almost nothing. He looked the part, and with his thick, authentic northern Italian accent, it sounded great, especially when teaching me a real insider's phrase, *in boca a lupo*, a sort of 'good luck' wish in deep Italian, literally meaning 'in the mouth of the wolf.' I got it, the wolf, Remus and Romulus-style.

Now, people being who and what we are, self-seeking beasts, that common scenario plays itself out over and over again in different venues, but generally speaking falls in line with an age-old theme: the fisherman tosses out the bait. Once it gets picked up, bit into, and swallowed, he can tug the catch along as fast and as far as he wants before either reeling it in for the kill or cutting it loose so it gets away wounded, sometimes mortally, or somehow manages to survive the ordeal, battered but not beaten and learns from it. There's really no good outcome for the fish, only bad and less bad, meaning the possibility of living and learning to be more discerning and skeptical moving forward, lost time being irreplaceable, so, unless you can somehow extract value by making something useful out of it, *caveat actor*.

It's not that he was really a bad guy; he wasn't. Rather, he was just another New York City industry hustler, like ninety-nine percent of us trying to get somewhere highly exclusive

without an invite—an Italian national and naturalized American, a clean-shaven, fifty-something trim guy, topped with short close-cropped salt-and-pepper gray, with a nondescript face except for wearing an expression that looked like it might just have something interesting to say, and more often than not seen toting an older model, blond-haired American trophy wife. I'll call him Genco, as in *Abbadando*. Why? Because I like the name, and, despite his role as writer and director and 'executive producer', he actually played the role as an advisor more than godfather, thank you Mario and Francis. I believe he meant well, meaning intended that everybody involved gets something they want worth their time and effort, and nobody wants to disappoint their colleagues and friends, or even themselves, but as nearly everywhere else, money talks, and his main focus was on raising it, so he was primarily beholden to the financiers, and therein lie so many of the rubs. In reality, again, that place, there are a lot of compromises that have to be made along the way, or else the thing isn't even likely to get fully started, let alone completed, giving nobody anything they set out for, which is the greater evil than most compromises. That, in my view, is not just a showbiz, fact of life, but impacts nearly all of creative, commercial life.

The first *favor* he asked for felt like an opportunity. He needed me to proofread the script, a feature just over one hundred pages. Since editing screenplays was not my profession, not

even an avocation I had any real experience with, doing it for a screen credit and bragging rights seemed reasonable—it was an ice-breaker and a valuable writing credit and resume builder. And since English was not his native tongue, the dialogue needed a lot of correction and fine-tuning, in a way that I was fairly competent at—a familiar environment and cultural milieu, New York wise-guys and wise-guy wannabes. In other words, for a serious guy like me who only wants to deal with quality material, especially when given an opportunity to help create it, it's a lot of real work. Painstaking effort. Every sentence, every phrase, every word, and every idea gets sifted through my acquired filters, and either passes through untouched (rarely), or gets tuned up, if not rewritten (frequently), which is to say once again and for the sake of emphasis, a lot of work. Flattered and challenged as I was, I got on it. It took hours and hours of concentrated effort over many nights for at least three weeks, maybe even longer than a month before I handed it back to him, "*Here you go, Genco. In bocca a lupo! What's next?*"

Genco had mentioned that not only did he already have a cool million in the bank to shoot with, but he also wrote the lead role specifically with Marisa Tomei in mind and was going to pitch it to her agent when it was ready. Well? Say no more than that, I was all in, and of course, he added a nice, fat, breakout role for me, perhaps even a scene or two with her. And, as a super-duper added bonus, a professional writing

credit for my effort. Now, that would make for a significant dimension added to my mark worth my time.

A bizarre synchronicity at play here, or what? Just around the same time, I received a call from a very cool downtown CBGB's chick who called herself *Lori Eastside*. This svelte, dark-haired, and pale-skinned honey in her thirties broke herself into the extras' casting scene by holding a one-time 'open call' for all the cool, very cool, and maybe not-so-cool people on the fringes of the business to come in and 'register' with her office. Calls for work from her office began trickling in almost right away, and with them, some very cool gigs. One in particular, she was 'checking my availability' and, if so, booking me for next Thursday. All I was told was that the shoot was out in the swamps of Jersey, a strip bar scene, i.e., my all-time favorite way to earn a buck. Yes, instead of me paying, or giving a gold chain away, see Vol. II, in a drunken daze of unrequited desire, actually getting paid to sit around and carouse with semi-naked or fully ladies. Life can be quite good, sometimes, like these times, even great, *right?*

It gets better. As soon as I get out there, a small, single-story, standalone, cinder block, and aluminum siding barroom built for fifty or sixty patrons, with the typical neon outline of a beckoning babe lit up above the front entrance near a lonely strip mall somewhere in the marshes of the Meadowlands, an early call, probably no later than seven am, I find out it's *The*

Wrestler,’ a film by the great Darren Aronofsky starring Marisa Tomei and Mickey Rourke, who will both be there today, all day. She’s the stripper and he’s the wrestler, and we’re the happy working-class guys who hang out in happy, working-class strip bars! Life doesn’t get much better than that, folks.

Picture this: there are about ten or fifteen of us union extras, the director, crew, the leads, and the actual bouncers from the bar hired by production to do security. When we first arrived, as we filed into the bar, they all but strip-searched us to make sure we were not sneaking in any recording devices. Phones were collected and held until we left the building.

“You got any drugs, bombs, or guns on you? Any cameras? Recording devices?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, cool. Go ahead inside.”

Of course, they made a big show of it the first two or three times people walked in and out, but by lunch break, that was it. Everybody loosened up, relaxed, and enjoyed themselves.

Like that. Even Marissa, who you could see was a little stressed at the start, in her G-string and pasties right in front of, inches away from our leering mugs, started relaxing and getting into the pole dancing thing too. You knew she was cool when she looked my way during a break between takes and, pointing at me, announced out loud to all in range: “*I know that look, (leering right back, like a sly fox). I’m gonna take ALL your money!*” So cute. So sweet. So much fun.

Sometime during the break, we all left the set, probably for an outdoor lunch, a kind of picnic, and I wandered into the woods a bit past one or two of the trailers set up as dressing rooms and ‘honeywagons’ where I spotted a workout bench with a bar and some loose plates scattered about, which I decided to put to use by doing a set or two. By the beginning of my second set, I heard two male voices and felt their approach, so I set the bar down and looked over my left shoulder to check things out. It was none other than Mickey and a darker, more compact and even meaner-looking guy I believe was his bodyguard. They were looking to do a few sets themselves, so I quickly got up, smiled, apologized, and headed back to the food. They nodded. No problem. Just get lost. More fun.

As a bonus, I made the final cut, staring right into the camera off to the side as *Cassidy* (Marisa) greets *Randy* (Mickey). Months after the release on DVD and I finally saw it, I thought it might have ruined the shot. Background actors looking directly into the camera, breaking that fourth wall, usually does, but apparently not because we shot it again and again, and Aronofsky's a stickler, so he must've noticed, but since he didn't say anything, we didn't make any 'adjustments'. At the same time, there was another 'stripper' all over me, standing beside me, caressing my shoulders, capturing my attention until it was diverted by Marisa's entrance into the shot. Anyhow, that's how it reads, so I guess it worked like that.

Anyhow, that's how the session went, and it only came to an official completion a week or two later when the fat check came, chock full of *overtime*, *night time differential*, *meal penalties*, and *smoke pay*—all the union perks on top of perqs. It was definitely one of the most satisfying, thrilling, and fun days of my whole surreal existence. But the best part was connecting with Marisa like that. Now, when I figured out a way to reach out to her about Genco Abbadando's script, it wouldn't be totally out of the blue. There was now a shared professional connection to refer to: me, the guy whose money she was going to take all of.

The Foundation

Union members in good standing are provided access to an associated but independent outfit that hosts a variety of invaluable programs and services for the community—from emergency funds in rough times to last minute Broadway theater seats to free teleprompter reading classes and on—the Screen Actors Guild Foundation. I can't say enough good about it because that's all there is from them, good on top of more good. I even had the chance to meet the great Robert De Niro before he lost his mind at a screening they got seats for. For another example similar to what one pays for at Actors Connection (and a real value there too), they provide an in-person, direct professional encounter free of charge, industry pros you can't just make an appointment with, no, forget that. And the Foundation's are even better because unlike Actors Connection and the like, they're not open to the public; not anyone with a checkbook and a dream can get inside those rooms, and the sessions are conducted in nonpublic spaces, like the fortieth floor SAG headquarters in Times Square, or the hallowed halls of the *American Academy of Dramatic Arts* down on Lexington, the country's first and oldest acting school. Just by being welcomed there you put yourself in the rarified category of industry professionals, and that sense alone brings out the best in you, it comes over you as soon as you walk through the doors and simply rise to the occasion.

Let's say the main guest, a well-known casting director busy on the indie circuit in town is in for the night and she's giving you a chance to do your monologue for her, any one you choose. Wow. How great. A real chance to shine by playing to your strength before a glowing bright light herself. I'm thinking about one particular night because I well knew who she was and chose to be there for this specific seminar, as she frequently cast actors at my level for quality projects—my niche. When the notices go out, you have to act quickly because, like everything else in New York, there's a lot of competition, and the spots fill up in no time. Anyway, we're seated in a small classroom, maybe twenty colleagues, Foundation members, getting ourselves prepared before the seminar starts. Among them, the guy next to me, a real mensch about my age and look—maybe less prone to the villain character but not by much, like, maybe the gangster's brother-in-law whose name I won't say because I don't want to bother asking for permission (Lou Martini), but a great guy with a smooth delivery and a long and rich industry pedigree. In fact, it was his dad originally cast to play the role of Luca Brasi before fate intervened. We worked many of the same types of gigs, similar types, usually neighborhood-knockaround type guys, often with an edge, those kinds of projects, and roles, so he's busy preparing himself as well. At that point, these sessions, it's a '*we're all in this together*' type of vibe.

In fact, we worked together on one of my earliest gigs. He plays a top-rated Tennessee-based Elvis impersonator, and I play his right-hand man, Dwight, with key knowledge of the local cathouse scene. It's an over-the-top, low-budget exercise in entertainment hysteria—a horror film. I won't even bother to name or describe (*Won Ton Baby*, 2009), but it's crazy fun and I loved every minute of my participation. In a life-imitating-art sort of way, out of anxious confusion (what to do?), I reached out to him for professional advice—more along the lines of avoiding real-life harsh confrontations and resolving ethical dilemmas with fellow actors and producers than about booking gigs or climbing up the ladder. Like a consigliere to my don, he knew what to tell me, and he got it right, both times. Anyway, that night, there for the same purpose, he leans over to quietly ask which monologue I'm doing. I show him the printed-out page and a half of Mario Puzo script with the highlights and pencil notations, and surprised, he right away cracks up, because, naturally, we are both huge fans of the first two *Godfather* films, so he gets it right away and lights up. It's a great bit, a classic Hollywood moment: “...and a man in my position can't afford to be made to look ridiculous!” I'm maybe the first guy he's ever seen who chose that particular scene for a monologue, and again, he totally gets it. So, guess what happens? When it's my turn, now really amped up, I get up there, *quiet on set*, with everyone's attention, including of course hers, I knock it straight outa' da' park. First swing. All confidence and all the

way gone. I was an actor. “*Johnny Fontane will never get that part!*” Damn straight. I was Jack Woltz, I was Rob Kabakoff, I was *bigrobtheactor*, and she said so herself, telling the riveted assembly, “*He drove that train right to the last stop,*” and along side Lou’s nod, maybe the most vivid compliment my modest acting skills ever got, certainly among the most memorable.

Another memorable Foundation event for the books was the premiere of Spielberg’s *Lincoln*, held in a big theater just a few blocks from my home. Up on stage after the screening, Sally Fields, the star of the event, was asked by the MC what key element she attributes to any actor’s success in the business. Her candid response? “*Fuckability,*” she replied, candidly and matter-of-factly. My takeaway? *Thanks, Gidget. I’ll keep working on it.*

Sometime after that, another seminar, even closer to home at Juilliard. Around one hundred of us sat with Steve Guttenberg (who I thought was an alumnus?), but no, anyway, I could swear he said so early on. Anyhow, for certain, he did say that while still in school, a professor told him that if one has that ineffable quality some might call charisma—meaning that you can capture and hold people’s attention—then, even if it’s not clear exactly why, and even if you only have three notes of the octave you can play, but can play them well, you can work in this business. The takeaway: So what if I only have three

notes? Just “*gimme a stage where this bull here can rage...*” and I’ll take my chances. 1, 2, 3. Thank you, Paul Schrader, Jake LaMotta, and Steve, whatever school you did or did not attend, that was encouraging, and that's exactly what these seminars are for. Thank you, Foundation.

My final event before being excommunicated for losing my ‘good standing’ status by going *fi-core* (more about that later) was perhaps the most thrilling. That morning, I got an email alert that they were giving away tickets for a screening in the intimate Bryant Park Hotel theater—around sixty seats—of *Silver Linings Playbook* that afternoon, after which the event host from *Backstage* magazine would be interviewing the director, David O. Russell, and the lead, Robert De Niro. Again, you have to respond to these invites very quickly, especially for these hot ticket items that get swallowed up within the first hour, sometimes the first few minutes, so timing is crucial, and this rarely ever early bird just happened to catch that lucky worm.

So yes, at the end of that barely entertaining, forgettable film, and the painful interview where De Niro looked at his watch and gave one-word answers, as “Jimmy Conway” climbed down from the stage just in front of us to exit stage left, he stopped for a microsecond as he filed past to shake each of our hands—the five or six guys who sat in the front row for exactly that purpose. That was a rush, shaking hands with Vito

Corleone, Travis Bickle, and Rupert Pupkin, and a spectacular coda to my Foundation experience.

Back to Marisa

Okay, so you got the picture. This particular night, perhaps only two or three months after *The Wrestler* shoot, the main event's guest was going to be sweet Marisa Tomei, and the session will be held downtown at the American Academy, and I'm in. This is at the same time that my ol' colleague Genco is busy preparing his second short film, in which I already locked in a cool supporting role, and is still working on the project he planned for Marisa. The event will probably follow the typical format, beginning with a screening of some of the Oscar winner's most recent work, then an interview, concluding with a Q and A from the audience. Here's my mission: Get to her, tell her about Genco's script, ask her how to get a copy of it into her hands by reminding her about the strip-bar guy whose money she was gonna take all of. She may remember, and if not? It's still a good story, and a true-to-life one, so I'm fully on it.

After the formal program when she left the stage to work the crowd, now closer to two hundred actors and fans, by mingling with the attendees I made my way to her, gently, step by step, not in any rush as the first mob converged on her.

When I eventually got into her space close enough to where I could make eye contact while speaking at a normal room tone volume, I told her about the script, that it was written with her in mind, and about Genco, Cannes, and The Wrestler, all in a single sentence. Then, in a second sentence, I asked how to go about getting her to look at it. Right away, she sweetly said to send it to her agent and gave me his name. Perfect. That way, when I got to him I could tell him that she told me to get it to you. That was about the best I could hope for.

After reporting all this back to Genco, impressed, he said to go ahead and get in touch with the guy. So, that's what I did. It might have taken a day or two to find the right phone number and then get him to take the call, but when I did, after explaining my purpose in about one sentence, he asked: "*How much money is there in escrow right now?*" It was almost like another "*You didn't learn the first time?*" moment. Escrow? Way over my pointy little head. I had no idea what he was talking about, so in the least clumsy way I could, I ended the call by answering that I'd have to get back to him. In fact, some time early on when Genco told me he had a million, without ever mentioning 'escrow', he later joked: "*I know what you're thinking: If I have a million dollars what am I making a movie for?*" We both laughed. Now I have my doubts about whether or not he ever even had anything close to that available and in his name. Anyway, without an immediate and sensible answer for the agent, the guy knew I

was a novice, and he didn't have time for novices. A strikeout. Game over. That's showbiz.

Anyway, this was Genco's department, but after reporting back to him, he never brought it up again. He was now focused on the current project, where I had that cool role, so I dropped it as well. Life goes on. That's showbiz. But a few lessons were learned with all that time spent editing, all that combined luck and effort getting myself in direct contact with a movie star, and the Foundation playing its role, whatever. It was another one of life's '*no more of that*' lessons, bearing out the old adage about *the minute you settle for less than you want, you get less than you settled for*. What began with the hook involving a feature film starring Marisa Tomei, a role, and a writing credit for me, turned into a short film where the other adage about *too many cooks spoiling the stew* ended with a small role for me, nearly written out, no known actors, and one of the worst production days I ever had the opportunity to waste my time with. Suffice it to say that with the shooting of that short film, which never even made it to a Staten Island Knights of Columbus hall, let alone anywhere on the *Cote d'Azur* outside the Palais, the entire experience, including the working relationship with Genco Abbadando, was a wrap.

Breaking the klipa

Yeah, there were serious thrills just mixing energies and locations with a lot of these very talented, gifted, and highly successful people in one of the world's most competitive markets, the commercial arts. I'm not talking about the wannabes or up-and-comers—nothing wrong with that, everybody starts somewhere unless your name is Barrymore, or Douglas, or Sheen, and even then you have to bring something valuable to the table. I'm talking top-of-the-line A-listers. I'm talking Spielberg, Tom Cruise, Harrison Ford, Scorsese, Sidney Pollack, Gerard Depardieu, Shelton (“Spike”) Lee, Tim Robbins, Raquel Welch, James Caan, Rubén Blades, Renée Zellweger, Faye Dunaway, and even big deal, single-named *Beyoncé*.

The big-deal lady turned out to be more of a salt-of-the-earth type than a celebrity snob. After the twelve-hour Clairol shoot, she greeted and thanked each one of us background and crew personally, clasping my hand and making eye contact as she said, “*Great working whichoo*” before heading to the next. I barely knew who she was the day before but quickly figured it out once arriving on set that morning. Wow, what a feast, everything from the usual five or six types of fresh bagels, three or four kinds of cream cheese, with chives, without chives, traditional and fat-reduced, lox with or without peppercorns, and omelets with anything you can think of and more of than you can eat, croissants with bottled jellies, jams, or fresh preserves to steamed crab legs and strips of filet

mignon for snacks, nonstop, endless, all day and half the night, not including the sitdown catered meals, and felt by the high-energy, triple A-game buzz that we were in the presence of industry royalty, a megastar so bright she obscured the surrealism of a black chick in a wig doing a hair product commercial.

To make it even all the more memorable and meaningful, every single one of us background performers ended up making a ton of moolah, an easy grand for the session, one of my fattest industry paydays ever. And let me not forget to include time spent with Bruce Willis trading lines from *The Godfather II* (“*and all that's left is our friendship*”), John Travolta introducing himself to us as though he was just one of the fellas in the service entrance of the Waldorf where four or five of us BG were positioned playing hotel staff, Willem Dafoe standing next to and right above me as I played a cop grappling with a bank robber on the street outside the New York Stock Exchange in *Inside Man* (2006), the beautiful Jennifer Lopez choosing the bench I was sitting on in Central Park to have her makeup touched up on the set of *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), and Denzel Washington who slammed the door into my desk on the set of *The Siege* (1998)—I could drop names all day, and each one with a short story anecdote, a single, but memorable moment we shared, most while ‘rolling camera’ but some just off set, that undefinable zone on the edge of the twilight one. I’m gonna have to run through

a few of them so they don't get lost in that forgotten mist I mentioned, so get comfortable and bear with me. If it sounds like I'm bragging? That's because I am, having gone from hanging out with graveyard shift car-service drivers and jailbirds to movie stars.

“Going Places” (1974), a film I watched back in my LSD, she loves me, she loves me not, tender-hearted tough guy days of sixteen years old (Volume I), was, to me, a cinematic masterpiece. Perhaps it was the lysergic opening of the so-called ‘third eye’. Maybe it was both. In any case, the impression stuck.

Now, fast forward to my thirties, and I’m one of the cool people, a union extra at the Soho Grand film set at nearly five AM in a project titled *“XXX”* (2005) starring the man himself, that renegade Frenchman Monsieur Gerard Depardieu.

Whatever the scene was, it wasn’t very interesting to me, a big crowd scene in a club type with little opportunity for recognition, being featured or an upgrade, but it was still cool, being paid just for being there and hanging out, mostly at the craft services table, testing out different mochaccino coffee blends while stuffing my face with Entenmann's and Éclairs.

Just before sunrise, as the crew is beginning to wrap things up and the ADs are signing the background players out, I'm off in a corner, by a stairwell, tired but waiting to sign out for the

very final call so as to extract the last increment of overtime the night had to offer. Suddenly, the lead actor walked past me, by himself on the way to his trailer, and remembered that great film from decades before. It was him, Depardieu, that guy, and this was my chance to meet him and express my appreciation for his work too, so I kind of stepped forward, imposing myself slightly on his path, looked directly at him, and said something to the effect of “*I’m a big fan*” to which he barely responded and just kept walking. He was exhausted, and I was in his way. It was a long night and he had no time for groupies, so all I got was maybe a quick nod and a mumble as he kept walking.

Now, I was frustrated; he was another big deal to me, and I wanted him to know that. There wasn’t going to be any 'next time', so just after he passed me, I turned around towards his back and slapped the top of his shoulder hard enough that I knew he’d turn back around, which he did. At that, we made eye contact and saw the anger in his face. So, I quickly said, “*Going Places*”, which brought an immediate, big, broad smile to his rugged mug. That was what I wanted. With that, he turned back around and headed to his trailer. Mission accomplished.

“*Breaking Away*” (1979) is a great film, but no, I didn’t work on it, and no, I won’t call it a masterpiece. But it is. Or nearly so. Anyway, it definitely left a big and lasting impression on

me: the story, the acting, the theme, the script, the characters. This day, as I sat around scoping out the craft service table and any hot actresses that might be around, I'm working some boring film set in Queens, New York—a family-style restaurant scene—and we're the dozen or so guests populating the restaurant. Anyway, I'm resigned to it; it's another day's pay so it's all good but no thrills available. Fine. That's why they call it 'work'. After probably half the day on the set, I begin noticing that one of the principal lead actors looks familiar, but I can't quite place him, so I keep looking until gradually, after a slow start all at once, it hits me, **BANG!** It's *Moocher* but thirty years later. Instead of a runty, long-haired teenage misfit with a big chip on his shoulder, now he's a bald, thin, middle-aged guy and that's all I know because I hadn't seen the script and I didn't really care, but whatever, I could never forget his character or his great lines, Jackie Earle Haley. Once it all became clear, I had to say something. Again, it's my chance, the film is brilliant, unforgettable, so I take position in one of the restaurant's dimly lit passageways between the restrooms, the kitchen, and the dining area, lean back in the shadows against the wall, and wait for him to pass me. Then, when my moment came, he's about the same height as me so just as he was about to pass, I stepped right in front of him, momentarily blocking his way. As soon as he looked up at me, seemingly preparing to clear me from his path, eyes locked in the moment, I quietly said, "*And don't forget to punch the clock!*", a reference to his character in the classic

film, who responds to his boss's order by wrapping his right fist tightly in a towel and punching a time clock with enough force to shatter its lens. Again, the sudden, broad smile of surprised delight. He knew I knew him, I was a fan, his work registered and lasted and I felt almost as good as he must have. Another mission accomplished.

Scorsese on the not-so-mean streets.

This mission was not accomplished, but it's probably worth telling anyway. The scene is Park Avenue, Manhattan, on a busy, warm spring afternoon, and Martin Scorsese is holding court on the sidewalk across on the other side. My companion, an elegant, WASPy older lady who frequently worked BG with me and shared a few of my other 'stay alive' schemes I won't get into at the moment, pointed him out barely a half-block away, surrounded by six or seven of his colleagues, investors, and fans. He's conducting the impromptu street session in a very animated way, waving his arms, speaking above the ordinary volume, pausing to make a point every so often, making it clear that he's in his element and enjoying the moment just as much as those around him were. As soon as I recognized him, I said goodbye to her, darted across the avenue to behind them, then increased my speed to catch up with the group he was now leading across Fifty-seventh Street and then down the next block into one of the staid, elegant

apartment building residences. What exactly I had in mind was vague, but I could not let the opportunity go without doing something, something that might catch his attention in a favorable way and get me on his radar, the maestro. As I got close enough to hear him speaking, anonymous, camouflaged by the masses on the crowded avenue, keeping up with but just behind them while waiting for a moment when he'd pause the monologue long enough for me to get in there without rudely interrupting him, but it never happened. He kept on talking as he was walking, no more breaks, so I kept tailing them until the moment they turned left to enter one of the residential buildings, at which point, feeling stymied, I remained in place just outside the front doors, watching them enter the lobby and then into the open elevator. I'm standing there cursing myself: Fool! You could have said something, you could have thought of something, but you didn't. You could have faked an epileptic fit like back in the Mini-Cinema days (Vol. I) and when they turned to look, got up and introduced yourself! Anything! You're supposed to be a New Yorker! Where's your chutzpah? 'Fortune favors the bold', schmuck! You'll never make it to the next level by just standing here like a 'mook'. You want to stay an extra forever? *Pathetic!*

As I stood there berating myself from outside, watching as his party disappeared into the elevator and the door shut behind them, feeling like a first-class schmuck, loser and has-been

who never was, for some crazy reason, the elevator door suddenly sprung open again. It must have had to shut down completely before resetting itself, so with it now open again, (SCHMUCK! *GO!*) I rushed past the two doormen and into the building, through the small lobby, and got on board just as it was about to close again. Now inside, it's me with him and his entourage in a not-so-big, old-time elevator at pretty much capacity. It's tight. One of them pressed a number button, then I pressed a number button above his just as the door shut. Okay, we're all inside, but he still hasn't stopped talking, not even a pause, he's telling a story, making a point about business, that's all I can hear, not just elevator chit-chat. There's no way I can interrupt without at least having something urgent and important or even amusing to say, and frankly, it's too late for that, and I can't even think of anything at all, not even 'hello', I'm so charged up and paralyzed by the adrenaline. Besides, that's not the way I really want to introduce myself to the great auteur. I'd be hoping for something a bit less intrusive, like maybe a Foundation event, or on set, maybe even best of all, at an audition. But it didn't matter because he kept talking all the way to the floor they were headed to until the elevator stopped and opened right up into the receiving area of the apartment they were headed to. Yes, inside the actual apartment which covered the entire floor, or floors, of the building, it had its own elevator access, no hallways or otherwise public spaces where they might encounter riff-raff like me, and that's where they exited the

car. Once they stepped out and took a few steps inward, they then turned around. All six or seven of them were now joined by several hosts, including the maestro, to get a look at who this guy that rushed into the elevator right behind them was. A real-life Rupert Pupkin, perhaps? Travis Bickle, maybe? All I could do was stare back, standing there dumbstruck for several silent seconds, a true *mook*, looking at them looking at me. Just as the elevator doors began closing again, I haltingly raised my right hand and started to slowly wave. They didn't budge. No one waved back. Stone-faced. All of them. Door closed. Scene.

A perfect moment

On the long list of memorable, if not on the short list of absolutely perfect moments, on the set of “*Across the Universe*” (2007) was an otherwise forgettable incident that, for just one quick moment, was of great importance. Not a big thing, no, a small thing, but a perfect small thing. It's that way often enough on film sets, especially on big-budget, major studio productions like that one—a lot of tiny parts that aim to fit together just right, frame by frame. When a background actor is selected for a featured shot, the challenge lies in the timing, tone, and overall delivery—getting every nuance exactly right with all the attention focused on him. Pressure. I've gotten it wrong often enough to know well the difference. As you can probably guess, this time—one of the precious

few when the entire universe played right into the moment's hands—it came out exactly right.

Imagine a four-square-block section of Manhattan's lower east side cordoned off and dressed up as 1968, from the automobiles to the newspapers, to the pedestrians and traffic signs, even the products in the shop windows—soup to nuts, the works. Quite impressive. The budget was astronomical, a Julie Taymor project, her claim to fame being the mammoth success of *The Lion King*, so the art department had the best of everything, plenty of it, and they did an astonishing job. Really, if you didn't know better, even if you did, it was still an eerie scene—so authentic-looking, with absolutely incredible detail, nothing observable overlooked. Add to that everyone in period wardrobe and haircuts; it was as if a time machine beamed you back there in your sleep, and you woke up in east coast hippie central, with the draft on, cities burning, counter-culture countering, reactionaries reacting, sex, drugs, and rock'n roll all the way. I was lucky enough to book a couple of days, working two different scenes, both unforgettable, enormously fun, and both ch-ching. One, the perfect moment.

It's early in the AM, just before dawn. The streets are quiet, dark, and empty except for the four leads—young musicians returning home from an all-night concert performance—and a rumbling newspaper delivery truck, with one driver and one

guy in the back hurling the heavy bundles from the open rear to the front doorways of the local businesses. Guess who? As the truck makes the rounds, slowing down a bit to round a corner but not stopping, on cue the bundle has to hit as close as I can aim it, from about twenty feet away and from a moving truck to the doorway they designate. Ok? Ok. Ready, ready. First take, on 'action' the truck starts rolling and the leads start strolling; a few seconds later, the lumbering vehicle begins making the turn, slowing down only slightly, then on second cue—a call over the walkie-talkie—I hurl. Not only do I hit the exact spot from a moving fifteen or twenty feet away, but it lands perfectly flat, creating a single, solid *thwack!* A thwack with authority, echoing with intentionality. No bounce, no roll, no slide, no nothing. I'm no athlete or sports fan, except for a New York team in the playoffs, and boxing, mainly as a spectator; watching grown men chasing balls or smacking pucks into nets puts me to sleep, so I never put in the time to develop any of those interests or skills, but a handful of times I was so deadly accurate, so dead on the money, I took myself by complete surprise. Like, *huh?* For other reasons, and as usual, we had to shoot it again and again, but without my ever reproducing that first, perfectly executed hurl at crunch time in the presence of dozens of observing professionals and peers. But it happened once, and the first time making it even more pronounced and impressive and it made the final cut. So, as I said, not a big thing at all, a small thing, but Big Julie saw it and had to be impressed. I helped

her make her movie. A small thing, yes, sure, life is composed mostly of those small things, and at the same time, a rare thing, a well-earned and well-remembered one too; that rarified moment of sublime perfection.

Despite all these and quite a few other cool encounters, I needed to shatter the *kliḥa*—the Kabbalistic concept of a shell that contains a more refined and evolved self but must be broken out of by that self to realize the next level of awareness, leading to fuller actualization more aligned with the divine presence—and the only way that can be done is from the inside out. It was perhaps with the help of a local rabbi and friend, Adam Jacobs, who, when introducing me to his wife—an actress who had a lead in a television prime time series—described me as “*that extra guy*.” Ouch. I didn’t start this project to call it a wrap at being a professional film extra; I had decided to become a professional *actor* under that frozen Long Island train trestle. Film extra was a step on the path, no doubt and no regrets, challenging enough to achieve just a somewhat steady position in that game, but it wasn’t at all the end game. No, far from it. With that, a painful realization: he didn’t say ‘*that actor guy*’, and along with everything that came before and leading up to that moment, the extra career was wrapped. The film extra had been on the outside, the actor just inside the next shell, waiting to bust out when given the go. So with that, the shell cracked, I had been leading an extra’s life, hustling background gigs practically full time,

counting ‘meal penalties’ and angling for featured upgrades, not serious, that all had to end. I had to get serious. That tentative life had to be replaced with a determined and focused actor’s life.

CHAPTER XI: *The script*

The funny thing is, or maybe not so funny as the case may be, that like the growth rings in a tree, you never completely shed your earlier selves. They're incorporated as one grows beyond them; still with you, inside, deeper, quieter, dormant while you advance by adding more rings of experience and context, until sometimes, these earlier selves lingering quietly at bay, and then in response to just the right provocation suddenly erupt, like the guy that blew up in the ship's galley out at sea and on the set of SNL. Of course, this can be good or bad; it depends on the circumstances, the outcomes, and how you see things. But in my case, well, it's a familiar tradeoff. A piece of Kabbo was still shaping me, sometimes in the driver's seat, often wreaking havoc beyond the point of care. As should be clear but worth saying, even in those cases and others similar, though it was a relief at the time, Kabbo stepping in, letting out that built-up poisonous pressure, the consequences are often real and enduring. *C'est la vie, motherfucker.*

My cousin, Alan, about seven or eight years my senior, was always a childhood hero of mine. I thought he was a genuine, full-fledged, tie-dyed, long-haired, and helmet with a '*ban the*

bomb’-wearing husky hippie, levitating the Pentagon and banging it out with the cops and construction workers over Vietnam, which at ten years old looked very cool to me. Was I a ‘commie’? Hell, I didn’t even know what a commie was, but I was definitely a rebel, as in the Black Rebels Motorcycle Club, “*What are you rebelling against?*” “*Whaddaya got?*” type of rebel, like that. The guy gave me his second copy of *Music From the Big Pink*. If you don’t know that album, you don’t know America. I don’t care if half the band was Canadian. I’m talking about the music, and the zeitgeist, whatever it was, hill-billy rockers. I can’t define it but I sure can feel it and it’s American. That’s right, “*Put the load, put the load right on me.*”

After school, a hoity-toity, fancy liberal arts college on the East Coast, he headed out West and became a successful, working actor, fulfilling his high school ambitions. You could see him in small roles on the big screen and bigger roles on the small screen regularly, and working alongside the ‘A-listers’. The guy later told me he was Nathan Lane’s understudy on Broadway. *Wow...* No, I never inherited that gene, y’know, but I had what I had, and with that, and a few good years of the actor’s hustle life under my belt, put out a call to him asking if he could help hook me up with a local agent. “*Sure,*” he answered right away, and gave me the contact info for his East Coast manager, one of the star agents in a well-known, long-standing New York agency. All I had to

do was call and tell the secretary that I was referred to so-and-so from my cousin Alan; with that I'd get an appointment to come in and meet. Great! That's all I could ask for, a shot to make a good and lasting first impression. Thanks, cuz! *Way to go!*

Let's call her Judith, Judy, the semi-big deal New York agent. A working relationship with her could definitely bump me up to the next level, no more crashing auditions or 'open calls'. I'd have representation in an industry where without it, you're a nobody. Now, before I get to the nuts and bolts of the sad tale, let me introduce it by making it clear that at this time, several years into '*the industry*' and already a member of the guild, I was on an up. Ready to take on the world: dean's list at John Jay every semester for the first five, worth repeating, blazing forward, full speed ahead. Instead of spending my winter breaks in a tiny, sweaty, single room in midtown Manhattan, I'm gracing the beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema with enough *real* in my pocket to please myself any way I chose. The professional photo shoot/headshot session I was practically duped into by my colleagues and friends looked like it might just pay off. The shots, taken right after my return from a long, slow stretch in that tourist's tropical paradise, reflected it quite well, the global playboy, man about town, an actor *bon vivant*, and I knew it.

So, the third time she tried to reschedule me, this time while actually seated for my appointment in the reception room of the agency, I wasn't having it. Right. The first appointment we made was canceled the day before by the agency, a schedule conflict. Okay. No problem. Second time? A week later? Same thing. That time, it's not feeling quite right, but okay, let us proceed. Third time? Now I'm there, on the scene at the agreed-upon time, in their office with my new headshots handy, still smiling, swallowing the frustration of the two previous jerk-arounds leading up to this moment. The receptionist comes out, apologizes, and says Judy's overbooked for the afternoon. Would it be alright to make the appointment again for another time? "*No*," I quietly said, "*it would not be*," rage now right behind my eyeballs. And that was basically the ball game, struck out at the plate. First time up, too, but it was D.O.A. when I got there, and out of my control, the rest was follow-through, a painful one. I was supposed to laugh and make a joke out of it before agreeing to give it another shot. But that's not Kabbo. Kabbo was fixin' to turn furniture over, and they sensed it. So, we had our twenty-minute meeting, all the phony smiles and nods you could fit in that space, and I never heard from Judy or her outfit again. As far as I figured, they wanted the compliant, or desperate type they could push around like that and this was a test to see how I'd fit. Well, now we all knew.

That's not to say that event, or non-event, was the make-all or break-all; no, not at all. It just meant that like with that gay-blade music video request, that there were doors I just wasn't going to walk through, which would, out of necessity, limit opportunities in an already very narrow, highly competitive field. But like Sammy Davis Jr. insisted, *I Gotta Be Me* and *me* just wasn't going to swallow that, especially not for what would likely turn out to be crumbs. That type of scene just wasn't in my personal script.

That *me*, eventually, the goal posts shifted for. For a long, long time, I maintained a fairly steady holding pattern, doing as much background work as I could hustle, and was pretty good at it. But there were those, like the Daniel I mentioned, who were much, much better. They would get gigs as recurring background for entire seasons, like I had on *Oz* until I got bored with that joyless set, where I was lucky to get just a few days on most of the big projects shooting in the city. Had Daniel been in Judy's office, that's exactly what he would have done, laughed it off and maybe parlayed that finesse into a steady gig on a prime time network show. You gotta be cool like him, especially under that sort of pressure and disrespect. Alas, I am not. Never was, and never really aspired to be. If you mess with me? Even today, I can take a joke, sure, "*everybody plays the fool, sometimes, there's no exception to the rule,*" but past a certain point, prepare for a 9-1-1 call. That's where it goes. Handcuffs and stretchers, cops, judges,

doctors, and lawyers. It'll be one or the other, maybe all five, and working as an extra, even a union one, courts disrespect, so I swallowed as much as I could for as long as I could, until the shattering of that *klipe*, and I decided it was time to find a way up and out even as that meant starting again at a new bottom.

Anyway, after years and years of cajoling BG casting outfits and ADs, counting 'meal penalties,' 'smoke pay,' 'wet pay,' time and a half, double time, 'golden time', etc., occasionally getting featured with the big-time players, maybe catching a featured break here or there, and eventually informed that I was now vested; had earned enough to receive a Screen Actors Guild Producers Pension and Health pension, now I needed an actor's reel and public credits, I needed a body of work. Now that the goal posts had shifted, I was more determined than ever to leave my mark, and not just as a split-second smudge on the screen, but as an actor, delivering a character, using a writer's dialogue, a script, a monologue, an improv, telling a story, whatever, my Paul Muni's "*I steal...*" or Dustin Hoffman's "*I'm walking here!!!*" moment, really making it into something I could be proud of and getting paid for it, if for no other reason than just to prove I could, reason enough in my world, and it might be a lot of fun too, so I had to find a way through and above the daunting obstacles just laid out because there was no taking 'no' for an answer on this. One time, a young filmmaker, or actor, a kid,

he told me he didn't care so much about getting paid, he cared more about the quality of the production, and asked me why it meant so much to me. My answer, “*Because I need to know that my contribution is worth a sacrifice.*”

Actor's life

Okay, so what do you do? How do you become an actor? I started as an extra. Right, as good a start as any. Good. Union vested, solid IMDb credits, and perhaps a bit of a reputation around town, a decent one for reliability and a strong ‘*character look*’, if not universally adored. That was cool. But it wasn't really what I set out to do. So? The short answer is *everything*. I'll narrow it down a bit: you have to live the life of an actor. That's the secret to success. If your goal is to become a professional actor, then you have to do what they do. It starts with you, your desire, your sincerity, and your determination to transform. You transform by changing what you do. You change what you do after making a decision, a solitary, singular act of will, changing how you think and about what you think then commence with the follow-through action. I had to now *become* an actor. That's what you do.

Okay. So what do actors do? Well, essentially and unsurprisingly, they act, as in *perform*. Some people like to

say, often dismissively, that ‘*we’re all actors*,’ and in its broadest, perhaps loosest sense, of course, obviously, like learning scripts, delivering lines with perfect timing and positioning and in a credible character not your own is no big deal; even some kids can do it, look at my ol’ pal *Opie*! And we play many roles during our lifetimes, often simultaneously, true enough, but this is not news. What I was striving for was ‘*professional*’ actor. Meaning, paid to perform scripts written by and for others in scenes of their creation, not mine. Theirs. Not real-life roles like undercover detectives, with enormous talent, improvisational skills and courage; no, I am talking about pure fiction. Yes, *all the world’s a stage*, clearly, but they don’t all begin at eight PM and have three acts with an intermission, a script, and snacks for sale outside in the lobby, or in studio dark rooms with tech pros working on critical post-production elements that pull the thing together for presentation on screens. That kind of *acting* is what I had in mind, a participant in a storytelling performance. The trick with that, succeeding at leading a professional actor’s life is getting someone to hire you to perform that service for them. That’s the first, main, and ongoing challenge: *book gigs*. You have to make that happen before anything else can in that world. That’s the key to admission, the *sine qua non*, not a union card or a college degree. You can go through the motions, get a job waiting tables, share an apartment with six others, take scene study classes, but until someone, like a producer, hires you to act in a production for them, well,

you're not quite there yet. I saw it. It was clear. The trick is to work.

That was the next vital step. So, who's going to hire me? Who's going to give me a job? It's not like trucking. It's not even the square root of the square root of trucking in terms of opportunity. Everything you see around you has moved on a truck at least several times. That chair? At a minimum: the wood from the forest, to the lumber yard, to the factory, to the showroom, to the homeowner. Capiisce? People that haven't been born yet need a trucker. Their children will need truckers and trucks. On Mars, they will need truckers and trucks. How many people need to hire a professional actor? How many professional actors do you see in front of you right now? That's the difference. So, who? ABC? Universal? HBO? The Weinsteins? Who? To find an answer to that riddle, you have to first remove the roadblocks. Which ones? All of them, all that can be identified.

Just about then it was on a set, working background on a union commercial that one of the main roadblocks was uncovered. Background on SAG commercials pays at least three times, usually more (see that twelve-hour Beyoncé shoot and feast), than the theatrical (film and TV) contracts pay, so they are prized by almost everyone, the exceptions being recurring character day-players on prime-time hit series, and of course, the leads. They don't do background, not even the

high-paying commercial ones, it's not a money thing, it's a status thing, professional status. But the rest of us munchkins lower on the totem pole, we grab 'em anytime they fall within reach, step over heads to get them, grovel, pay extortion, and commit assorted acts of sinful carnage and bestiality for those golden background gigs. Whatever it may take, a month's bills in a single day? A score not to be overlooked, which in my case, snagging them was rare but not never, as booking them from the tiny number of agencies whose domain they belonged to, required, in my view, beaucoup sucking up, and without any guarantees, thus, a bridge too far. Anyway, it was on a set like that, I forget the client, could have been IBM, whoever it was had no detectable budgetary constraints, but one of the other cast members, none other than that legendary Bay Ridge sage Lou Martini, who crystallized it by commenting: "*The way to get principal work is to stop doing extra work.*" That, I remember. Of course, he meant television and theatrical, not commercial, which was clear and well understood by all in earshot who happened to be listening. That particular simple insight was nothing less than a sublime revelation. I heard him. Just stop. It meant sacrifice. I was established on the New York scene as a reliable background player good for a number of types, and that was how I got vested, so giving that up wasn't exactly meaningless. One year I probably earned half of my income, maybe more from that work alone, so, as I said, it was a sacrifice, but one I began to see as vital. I soon began hearing myself say: "*Thank you, but*

I'm not doing background anymore." I began telling people off, jerks who loved to use their power to put others down, I even took one of the bozo outfits that called themselves "Central Casting" (as though it was the same company that dated back to when Laurel met Hardy and earned its oversized reputation in any way other than using that name as a 'brand'), to Small Claims court for being grifting bullies, e.g., taking money for 'registering' with them to be in their 'book' after paying the twenty-five dollar "optional" fee in cash for the privilege, then afterwards calling the same people in for work they always called, 'book' or no 'book.' The old Pareto Principle, twenty percent of the people got eighty percent of the work. I get that, an inescapable element of the substrate of reality, but it doesn't mean you really need to take people's money for it and never be called on it. The case, though dismissed, was dismissed without prejudice. It was my lawyer and former buddy that dropped the ball by inexplicably showing up to court with an empty briefcase after I had supplied him with vital documentation, but I made my point, thanks largely to a surprise witness, a courageous soul with charisma, courage, and conviction who goes by the name Victory Shawn, a fellow munchkin that came through at the last minute with significant first-hand testimony. Anyway, it's all on public record, enough for me, so I let it drop after that because there were other bridges that needed crossing before burning. I was burning the bridges that needed burning, and with a full heart. You don't get promoted in that racket. You

have to promote yourself, and I had. Now all I had to do was get the outside world to know and respond to it. More work. Fine. I'm game. Let's go.

Aside from credible representation, what an actor needs to promote himself, arguably more than any other single tool, is a reel. A reel is a brief review of various characters in various scenes you performed in video format. That could be from television, film, student films, classroom exercises, something you put together on your own, not so important, what's important is the content. The idea is to promote your strengths, what do you do well? Comedy? Drama? Action? The villain? Hero? The clown? Some of each? Like Guttenberg's three notes, you put them on display for anyone in a position to hire you to see, if of course you can get anyone to, another obstacle. But reels are worth one thousand hundred-dollar headshots, résumés or even recommendations. Show them. And that's what a reel does.

So, how do you create a reel? As well as subscribing, scanning, and submitting through the online publications at least twice a day, every day, for just about any paid role I might possibly fit, I went back to the schools, same list, basically the most active: NYU Film School, School of Visual Arts, New York Film Academy, and Columbia. Students tend to 'hire' or cast those they don't have to pay—young actors willing to work for experience and a résumé builder, or actors

needing material for their updated reel, even more than a few just for the kick. On more than one occasion, after submitting myself for nearly every project imaginable and attending every single follow-up audition, even those I knew I wouldn't get or take, I'd eventually be cast for a decent shoot, maybe one out of twenty or thirty, then quietly making my offer—I'd need to be paid for the day, a modest sum, and a copy for my reel, just so I knew we all meant business. If you can't pay me the hundred bucks for the day, see me when you can, and until then, break legs. That attitude.

Getting my footage from the shoot often proved as difficult or more than getting the gig in the first place. Students will tell you almost anything to get what they want from you, and then afterwards? Once it's "in the can" (they have the footage they need), it's a whole new relationship. And not always a good one from my perspective—forgetting me or passing me off to someone else, "*Sorry, Rob. Call Chauncey, he has your copy,*" but Chauncey's not returning calls. "*Sorry, Rob. Chauncey's on vacation but will be sure to call you as soon as he gets back,*" sure, right, making me work, chasing them just to get what they agreed to. Every time I'd hear the words '*Sorry, Rob,*' it felt like it was time to unlatch my Browning. So, rather than that, I learned to insist on the pay after each shoot day. This way, when I hear '*I forgot to go to the ATM,*' especially after a long, hard day's shoot when I am the central

character, if they want me back for day two or three, they have to not forget to go to the ATM before we shoot again.

And the reel? I had to push like that nearly on every student gig. The account stays open until I get it. More than once I had to get a little bit ugly, including veiled threats. But it worked. Spoiled kids, almost to a one, whose well-to-do parents pay a ton to indulge their children's fantasies while having them thinking the entire world will treat them like that, "...*but, I'm a student!*" Whatever they said to try to argue I already heard before many times so had my pat replies ready. Anyway kids, bottom line? Welcome to my class at '*Fuck you - pay me*' academy. Now, let's roll camera.

What happens during the transformation process is not only the construction of a reel, a good one, but the unfolding of an adjusted lifestyle, now more and more about scripts, rehearsals, submissions, auditions, performances, shoots, screenings, and roles than about who was casting which background project this month or open registration calls coming up or how many meal penalties we got on *War of the Worlds* last Tuesday? Naturally, along with these events and considerations are the people attached to them, and you become attached as well and through the project to them, you make contacts, building a network of colleagues and friends. A bond is formed during the creative act. We made this. She was my scene partner, that guy did wardrobe, he was the D.P.

Let's go for drinks after we wrap. Etc., and in turn they can lead you to further connections and possible gigs, a virtuous cycle.

In essence, you have to create, then inhabit that world in the niche you carve out for yourself, then the things that happen in that world happen to you because you created it and put yourself in its center and keep yourself there. Not so complicated when you look at it that way. Make yourself into the thing you want to be, caveat being of course, something you actually can be, unlike in my case, say, a nuclear physicist at Stanford or MIT, a heavyweight boxing champion, or a magic genie freed from a lamp granting wishes.

Back at TOPIC House (Vol. I), one of the more useful slogans I took with me was: '*You can't think your way to right living, you live your way to right thinking.*' That's the way to transformation, you become what you do. How well you may or may not handle the things that do come to you in that world you create is on you as well, but you are then in the game, not stalled in neutral, paralyzed by procrastination and self-doubt, imagining it from outside. Now you're in it, living an actor's life.

My Lover, My Homie, My Friend (2012)

As part of my transition, evolution from film extra to principal actor, it was necessary to get on stage, at least enough times to put some respectable credits on my resume, and to ‘*earn my chops*’ in that seminal theatrical venue. I’d done it a few times as a kid, and even once or twice as a young teenager (Volume I), but not since, and my memories of those occasions consisted mainly of the stress and performance anxiety. Obviously, in front of a live audience, there are no second takes; everything is on the line in real-time, hence, the mad adrenaline rush. But it ain’t cheap. You have to earn it, and you do that by hard work. No shortcuts, no substitutes.

When I entered the dimly-lit, chilly Flatiron district rehearsal space, a small room in the large studio, I already knew mine would be the only paleface in the crowd. The cast was all young African American, males and females in their twenties and thirties, and except for the lone white-guy villain, so were all the characters. The week before, when Melanie Miller, the writer, producer, and director of this romantic comedy, cast me immediately after the audition, my confidence level was high, and I was psyched to get going. Already inside, seated on the dusty floor among the strewn-out coats, jackets, script pages, and backpacks, was the rest of the eight members of the cast. Except for one young lady, no one responded to my entrance; they just seemed to keep up the conversation among themselves as if it barely registered. The young lady caught my eye and motioned to a spot next to her she quickly created

by shifting her belongings towards her and inching herself over a bit. Once I took my seat, as I was listening, it became clear that they were not just chit-chatting among themselves, ignoring me; it was the lines of the play they were rehearsing. That's how convincing and natural they were. With that, my energy and enthusiasm level ratcheted even further up. The talent already in that room was bound to elevate mine; that's how it works. As in most fields of endeavor, especially the creative, there is a tendency to rise to the level of expectation, and with that, rise we did. *Hallelujah!*

For nearly three months, we rehearsed the play scene by scene, again and again, twice a week, every week, until we all knew it cold—backwards and forwards. In the process, we formed a strong and warm professional bond, like a sharply focused family team, with everybody relying on everybody. There was only one performance scheduled, sold-out, and it was to be held at the Tribeca Performance Center, a three hundred seat venue in lower Manhattan. Melanie would be paying us all a flat rate, and in exchange for that, and the chance to shine on stage through some quality material, we all gave it our all. My scene partner, Lola, arrogant Wall Street big shot John's trophy wife, played by Scheffee Wilson, think a gorgeous, black Lucille Ball with perfect comedic timing, and I hit it on all counts. Had she not been married? Well, take a guess. Anyway, the night of our performance, right before the curtain and just off the stage, DK, the company clown

playing the role of MC, who somehow helped hold us all together, led us in a foxhole prayer, eyes closed, adrenaline flowing, and hands clasped, promising that if even one of us fell, the others would be there to pick them up, was one of the most exhilarating and sincere group prayer sessions I ever experienced. And no one fell. In fact, as stated earlier, when Lola and John's scene came up, the sudden appearance of a white face up on stage, in front of an almost entirely black audience, was an attention-getter just on its own. As my character started singing the Jefferson's TV show theme, "*Movin' on up*," hamming it up, they riveted in. By the end of our dramatic scene, when I slammed Lola into her seat, and then gratuitously, unscripted, kissed her on the cheek? They went wild. That was the first applause of the entire play, and another perfect moment worth all the effort and sacrifice that led up to it. In spades, y'all, worth it in spades, pardon the pun.

The Fantastic Bus (2013)

By this time, I pretty much figured out that for an actor, it was all about the script. An acquaintance in the neighborhood, a Broadway actress, a red-headed, blue-eyed doll-face who had a lead in a current musical hit, one afternoon over a cup of coffee, was telling me about a script her agent sent her. She radiated with enthusiasm, beyond the words I got it. It thrilled

her. There was something in it she needed to express, or somehow connected deeply with, so it was an exciting opportunity for her artistically, creatively, and professionally to work with and perform. It wasn't about pay, the venue, co-stars, or even the 'escrow' or immortal stardom; it was about the script—she never even mentioned anything else. Okay. Got it. Now, and in light of the Abbandando/Marisa fiasco, I'm actually beginning to think like an actor. The script.

Shortly afterward, when the Montreal-based filmmaker called to invite me for a Zoom audition, he only sent a page or two a day or so before. But I'd be able to tell just from that whether it was something I could connect to and work with—i.e., credibly deliver—or something like an inbred, solipsistic eighteenth-century British nobleman complaining about chronic insomnia to the disinterested archbishop, totally out of my range, like kissin' a dude. If the script isn't working for me, if I don't really get it or can't feel it, a string of tired and mindless clichés, let's take a pass even if it's offered. Others are sure to follow; they always do so long as you stay active in the game, and better fitting ones.

Eventually, it became clear that the project came first. If it's not that way, if it's not something that I can point to with pride, "That's me" again (but I wouldn't have to shout and point)—why bother?

There'd be no value. It was no longer just about becoming a '*professional actor*' but becoming a professional actor in quality productions. That was the score. On this one though? Straight from our Canuck neighbor? The one where I'd be playing his ungentle first-generation, Jewish-Canadian dad traipsing around the leafy Laurentian Mountains dragging his reluctant family along in his crazy converted-to-a-camper school bus, it was a bullseye. Though the script was sparse, perhaps even '*underwritten*', the project taken as a whole, as it should be, I had high enough hopes to be really, really psyched. This was not a background gig, or even a supporting day-player role, it was the lead.

A few days after the Zoom meeting, I got an email inviting me up to Montreal for an in-person audition at the studio, all expenses paid generously. The psyche was intensifying. After accepting the invitation, he sent more of the script, this way, I'd be at least 50% off book, or at least familiar enough with the material for a casting session. I won't go through the blow by blow, but put it this way: when I walked into the studio the afternoon of my appointment, there were no other actors auditioning for my role. The other three roles—my wife (his mother) and him as an adult and as a child—had multiple auditionees, so my confidence level rose to where I could be my sharpest and at the same time most relaxed. Later on I was informed that the clincher was my trucking experience, telling him I could drive the big, crazy bus with the 1960s air brakes

and no power anything, even on fast mountain road curves. Okay? He was matching them to me.



The Schoels in full bloom. Montreal, 2013

A week or so after returning from the three-day trip north, and after being put up very comfortably by the producers, Dana the director called offering me the part, including a ten-day stay in that chi-chi townhouse hotel on Rue Sherbrooke from the audition again, in that chi-chi neighborhood, the one with all the bank headquarters and art galleries, that type of scene. Add to that a driver, three meals (on set) a day and a per diem, and a healthy stack of bragioli to top it off. It was essentially a SODEC gig with an accomplished writer and director at the helm, meaning on Canada's big, fat, silvery dime. All that

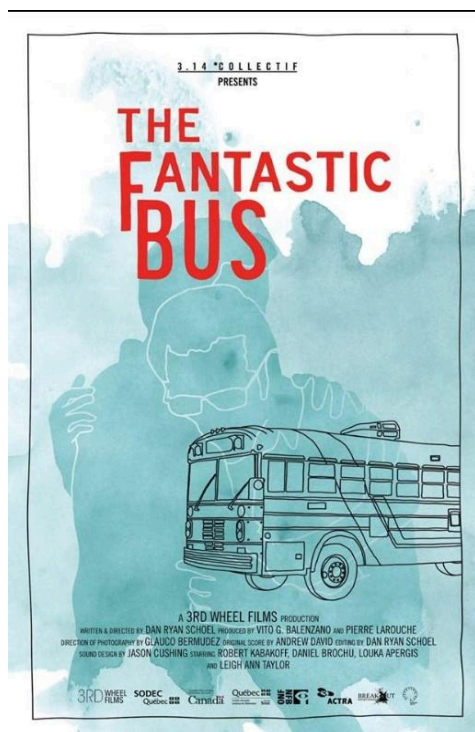
meant an excursion into another world, a world where I would be treated like a movie star, and by the end of the shoot, I kinda felt like one. The deference can be seductive, e.g., my personal driver and assistant, a semi-retired semi-pro ice-hockey goalie and full-time member of the Iroquois Six Nations, carrying my umbrella and bringing me fresh coffee exactly how I drink it, and especially when attached to something reality-based and at least somewhat appropriate, like, I'm the project's lead actor, and sustained. Though I never took it for granted, in fact it was a bit awkward at times, like when he came to me holding the umbrella, me not getting that he intended to hold it for me so I extended my hand to take it from him before realizing what was going on, it wouldn't take that long to grow accustomed to, though I'd always be humbly grateful, I suppose.

The end result of that shoot—all that work, planning, talent, and resources—in my view, is a minor masterpiece. Not only was I given a chance—a week or more-long chance—to bring my very, very best with me to a task, but the outcome of that task, and the effort by the entire collective all focused together on a single goal, and having the means to achieve it, including the now all-important talent, well, I'd say, we all scored. For a twelve-minute family drama about forgiveness and reconciliation, a universal theme wherein the actual script isn't necessarily the main force delivering the story, it's only one of them so doesn't need to have a lot to say, it says enough, and

the message is well received. During one pivotal, climactic scene, the son, now a young man, is confronting his father for his failures, and the stored-up resentment explodes. The father, now a tired version of his younger self, rather than reacting defensively, takes it in, and at the end of the tirade, just after a brief silent pause, they suddenly embrace. At the moment of the hug, for some unknown reason, my legs sort of gave out, and I all but collapsed onto the embrace, onto his shoulders with a combination of grief, regret and love. I had no conscious intention of doing that; it wasn't scripted or part of my 'act', but it happened, and though I felt shame, I went with it. Something about it was too real. In fact, they used that moment, that frame, to design the promotional poster for the film. Go figure.

Apparently, the film and its message were so well received that SODEC, the *Société de développement des entreprises culturelles* (government-owned production agency), brought the film all the way to the Cannes Film Festival. There, it screened not only downstairs on demand at the Court Métrage, but also in a ninety-seat screening room they reserved for their market, international filmmakers, producers, and distributors, showcasing their ideal shooting locations and film-friendly industry incentives, and *moi*, twice, all in the actual Palais, not just close by the festival somewhere no one goes during the main event.

Of course, once I heard that, I immediately secured a pass into the *grand palais* with festival set asides for ‘talent’, then hopped aboard an Air India jetliner and flew across the great Atlantic all the way back to the Cote d’Azur to make that scene myself, a ‘*victory lap*’ as a pal of mine noted. Oh yeah, oui, oui, it's me. It was quite a way from the Baldwin train station almost two decades before, and it took long enough, but there I was. In-fucken-credible. In the palais and on the big screen, a professional actor marketing himself at Cannes, displaying his wares, playing all three notes for all I had in me, even to the point of bordering on obnoxious. Yes, it went a bit to my swollen graveyard shift gigolo head, telling major producers I was their next star.



Every day for like ten straight, I trained it in the forty minutes from the sketchy zone by the station in downtown Nice where I stayed at a funky hostel I knew from an earlier excursion as a world traveler. While at the festival, each day after the first weekend, the crowds thinned out and the energy dropped from something like Woodstock-level excitement, a world-wide tribal gathering of creatives, to more

like “*The Day the Earth Stood Still*” by the end of the week. That first morning though, the nine twenty AM local from Nice, as soon as I stepped off the platform, I fell into a sea of people, thousands and thousands from all corners of the globe flooding the narrow cobblestone streets, the crowd pulsing with nearly every language imaginable and more that weren't, merging together from every direction and headed to the same place, the ground level check-in stations on the pavilion perimeter just a few steps from the main entrance. That was when the surreality of the moment really hit. While merged in along with the pulsating tribes, I was bracing to be told, ‘*terribly sorry monsieur, but there seems to be a miscommunication, we have no name on our register matching yours*’, or something to that effect. It's possible I may have actually been in the *Twilight Zone* just before the final reveal, doomed to argue forever with a snooty French-speaking clerk at the famous event while all the other attendees filed in, occasionally one or two glancing my way to offer a sideways smirk or exaggerated cough, but when I finally reached the front of one of the lines and was called to the counter, they checked me in right away, and along with a welcome package handed me my pass badge and there I was, embossed in glorious transparent plastic, that was my name, that was my headshot, and that was me, they even had a small color-coded circular sticker in the upper corner indicating in what capacity you were an invitee, in my case, yellow, for ‘*Talent*’, and I’m nearly stunned. That card, that plastic-coated

image looking back at me, not since my military ID card on that lonely bus ride back from San Diego (Vol. I) did my photo on a card resonate with such incredulity, yet, it wasn't a *dimension beyond imagination*, it was actually happening.

Since I knew this was a one-and-done event, I made the most of it. The lower energy made it easier to connect with the other die-hards still there, hawking whatever they had to hawk to the other die-hards doing the same. While no one except SODEC seemed all that impressed with me or my film, as one might imagine, the competition is literally 'world class', so just being there, on the inside, is a score.

To my surprise, it's not an event for actors, and there weren't many there, at least not that I met; the competition is between and among filmmakers, studios, production companies, distributors, and vendors, i.e., the industry. I did connect with a young filmmaker from Brooklyn of all places, and he booked me on the spot in a three-segment Batman fan film as Commissioner Loeb, Gordon's boss, and the Caped Crusader's law enforcement nemesis, all three parts. So, while none of the major producers took me seriously, as far as I know, I didn't walk away empty-handed, and the fan film? In my humble view, and not as a comic book fan, it's as good as *The Fantastic Bus*, so, another quality credit proudly added to my expanding filmography.

“No. Cherly...”

Along with all the weird and sometimes embarrassing stage antics—a titleless conceptual art presentation with actors mimicking frenetic factory machinery to the writer/director's poetry—in a tiny thirty-seat theater district performance house almost as old as Manhattan itself, came some pretty cool fun stuff, the Tribeca Performing Arts Center gig—and more at the Producers Club, serious stuff too, like playing a prosecutor to James Earl Ray while the ghost of MLK leads the defense. Possibly the weirdest, coolest and funnest of all, in the spirit of *Tony and Tina's Wedding* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, was a wild bit of interactive theater with me as the mysterious Cuban “Uncle Tito” in *The Bar-Mitzvah of Harry Boychick*; *The Boychick Affair*, performed for and with a live audience, the ‘bar-mitzvah’ attendees, in the Times Square Performing Arts Center. That iconic eyesore of a soulless, pink brick structure was built as a multi-level porno megastore on Forty-third and Eighth in the eighties, now converted into this kind of crazy, dynamic freak show venue, hosting all types of offbeat diversions, like a circus carnival’s extended haunted house attraction with different *Rocky Horror* style thrills and macabre beasts, like, every other month. Ironically enough, it was a place I visited frequently back in my vulgar lowlife and lovin' it younger days, for different purposes, usually involving quarters and curvy women in very loose g-strings (see Volume II) jiggling to Barry White, but now back

moving in the current groove, as the times, they had a-changed there, and for me too, though still on the weird side and still lovin' it, living an actor's life, neck-deep.

The weirdness of that particular gem began one early spring Sunday afternoon in the quickly populating theater lobby of the Times Square Performing Arts (nee mega-porno house) Center where I found myself waiting for an appointment with the main Jane. Surrounded by the chatty, happy Sunday afternoon in the city 'guests', seated among the tightly packed crowd of maybe seventy or eighty, excited folks filling in past the velvet rope with tickets in hand, laughing and joking among themselves, as though it was in fact a large extended family attending a real bar-mitzvah which would have looked and felt exactly the same to me. Weirdness. The producer, writer, director, who played the bar-mitzvah boy's mom, Amy, a sweet and sexy middle-aged lady with a boatload of her own children, from a toddler to teenagers, a west coast Hebrew, invited me to meet her there just as the matinee was getting underway. We'd never met before; she cast me off a submission, so it would be a first time for both of us. She'd seen my headshot, of course, and probably my reel, so had a pretty good idea who to look for. Me, on the other hand, had no clue. It was all done online, then a phone call, but no visual.

Meanwhile, I'm sitting there, exactly where we agreed, for like, ten or fifteen minutes, looking around, it's getting to be a bit past our time, when suddenly from out of the crowd emerges this woman with intense but polite urgency pushing through the gatherings of ticket-holders towards me, until finally landing right in front of where I sat. Looking up I ask: "*Amy?*" Then with a piercing eye-contact aimed right into my consciousness, holding the focused stare a second or two longer than would be common, she takes my hand in both of hers while bending downward to where I could hear her whispering close, and replies: "*No... Cheryl, Cheryl Boychick.*" Before either of us spoke another word she takes me by the hand, pulls me up, then off with her double-time quick right back through the growing crowd of still arriving guests, and into the dimly lit cavernous walkways and aisles with stairways leading to hallways with compact rooms above, beneath and behind the main floor dining room. With audience seating for around a hundred and twenty-five the space was designed to be comfortable while being wined and dined and entertained for a couple of expensive Manhattan hours. The dining room was the center of the performance narrative action, where along with the tables and chairs and candle lit setups, there was a dance floor and a portable platform stage at the head of the room supported on either side by a three foot wide three-step aluminum ladder. Deeper inside the ghost of porno house past, behind the stage she led me up a narrow stairway into the upper hallway, past the

utility and storage closets, past the emergency exits and lavatories, to the dressing rooms, where she dispensed with the customary knocking and just marched in, introducing me to fellow cast members as “Uncle Tito”, and them to me, and of course, by character name and relation.

After our phone call earlier that morning, I was expecting a more formal first meeting, like a business discussion, maybe a ‘getting to know you’ for ninety-seconds interview type of event. I hadn't even been informed that I was cast nor agreed to accept. There was no audition, like with the ninja burglar, they just assumed I could and would do it. Meanwhile, I was still checking it all out, due diligence, the casting notice read like a fun way to make some pizza and beer money and an interesting addition to my résumé, but my mind wasn't at all set. I never did much interactive, just once before, and it was as much a headache as a thrill, a lotta buck for not much bang, in fact I just turned another one down, mainly because I got a bad vibe from the cast, I thought they were all up tight queers pretending to be straight, even the cute young chick whose production it was, and would have been half the reason I took the gig, so who needs it? And this? Good vibes but for sure a new challenge that I was not at all confident I could even pull off, as my Spanish is limited and that's what the role calls for and there was no script for me, only a rough outline, like I gave the kids at camp, with only a few scheduled lines for Uncle Tito, meaning I'd have to mostly wing it. On top of all

that, I may or may not even get turned on by the whole ‘interactive’ thing. I didn't even know the full *Boychick Affair* story and Amy never volunteered it. Instead, she invited me to sit through it, right now, today, during which all would be made clear. As it went down, as far as she was concerned it was a done deal after she took one look at me sitting there, digging the scene while catching the vibe, and must have decided to just pull me right in, figuratively and literally. By the end of that surprise introduction/induction ceremony, including sitting as a ‘guest’ through the entire matinee, in response to my new environment and role in it, I began becoming *Uncle Tito*, a Spanish-speaking mystery caballero who they respect but not necessarily trust, who’s always around the periphery, yet known to step forward saving the day when the chips are down, but no one in the family seemed to know exactly who he is, where he came from, or how he fits, this quiet, solo Latino among an eclectic and eccentric clan of colorful Ashkenazis.

Anyway, that four-week stint was a blast, every minute of it, despite a lot of bad Chinese food, drinking some awfully sweet Manischewitz, and having a lot of laughs playing make-believe with strangers frequently trying to get me to break character, and making some cool friends along the way. When that final out-of-the-blue call came in, and from an underling, telling me I was ‘released’ from the next week’s performances, I was a little disappointed to find out that I had

only been cast as a stand-in for the regular Uncle Tito (also one of the producers) from the get-go, as he needed four weeks off for another gig, which they never told me until that call, the night before what would have begun the fifth week. I was pissed. They could have been straight up with me from the start, even before that surreal moment with “Cheryl” in the lobby, it would have been fine. Why the games? Getting played? Hustled in Times Square by out-of-towners? Me? Ouch. Anyway, whatever, it was fun, I got the pizza and beer money and the résumé credit, and that’s showbiz, y’all, the comedy and tragedy of it, the meteoric rise and sudden fall of this poor player's mysterious Uncle Tito.

Datin’ Marvin (2014)

Was I paying my bills this way? Well, some of them, maybe even most of them at times, but no, not all of them, at no time. Someone dedicated to earning a living in an actor's life will have to solve that problem as well. The main focus for me was keeping a tight grip on my steady expenses while staying reasonably comfortable in a very convenient setup for a single actor in New York City, and that I did, thank you West Side Y, where some quite well-known creatives before me made stops, among them Tennessee Williams, Jack Kerouac, and Kirk Douglas. Thus, I was able to continue chasing that recurring role in a primetime network series I set as my next

big goal while buying my twice-yearly international flight tickets for regular breaks into my world traveling life. That small kid taking the big city bus up Coney Island Avenue was one of those early rings that stubbornly refused to fade quietly into the past.

At this point, deep into the commitment to transform from film extra to principal actor, at least half the auditions I got myself invited to were for gigs I never even planned on booking. The audition was the exercise, a free acting class, School of Hard Knocks-style. Some of those auditioners really put you through the paces, making one 'adjustment' after the next until they feel they've seen enough, and I'm about out of performance ideas, until I'm like: *'Dude, you want Joaquin Phoenix? Get Joaquin Phoenix. I only got what I got.'* Fine. Still a great value. All it costs is time and effort in exchange for which is all but guaranteed a worthwhile return in experience, the best teacher. Not only was I (fake) auditioning for the role but also, simultaneously, had to act like I was seriously interested in the project, playing them as they played me. Sometimes, they held auditions just to get a feel for the script, while without 'full disclosure', meaning never really intending to begin the project at that early stage in the first place. Yes, indeed, all the world is a stage.

On one of these routine escapades, not clear on what to expect by way of seriousness, when I entered the downtown by

Union Square audition space, there were three people, two chicks and a young dude, seated on directors' chairs on an actual darkened stage having me read for the role of Marvin in a film about Marvin, the loquacious hired assassin with delusions of professional ethics. The two women in their thirties and a young man in his early twenties, who pro forma never bothered introducing themselves, seemed very entertained by my cold read, and I had fun too. The script worked for me, and I got the project vibe. It was a good afternoon, but after the audition, school was out. In other words, like I was advised way back when by those two seasoned actresses after the Lotto gig, just forget it, and think about the next one, the next submission, the next audition, and the next gig, until, if and when you have a reason to pick it up again. If that happens and it catches up with you, like when the email came before the end of that week offering me the gig, including decent compensation, especially for a New York Film Academy gig, it happened. So, now there was a reason.

Turns out, the kid's parents literally owned a bank, a '*boutique bank*' as they described it, in Switzerland where his family was based, and they routinely invested in independent film projects, and from where they sent their protégé son to the New York Film Academy. This would be his second professionally produced, cleverly written, and beautifully shot short film, which would be among his pitching tools to studios

and bigger budget producers, a director's reel. So they pulled out all the stops, spent a big bundle on it, and though the two professionally overextended females they hired to produce the project tried right away and failed just as fast to gyp me a bit (*really?* You clowns.), the family, and the rest of the team were fully on the mark, from wardrobe to the DP, to my scene partner, all serious pros working for decent pay, now including Marvin himself, me, all of us, all 'A game', all the time, just how it's supposed to be.



A three- or possibly four-day shoot, with the fourth added for 'safety', and a roughly twenty-page script, is a lot of work to prepare for, involving securing locations, obtaining the necessary permits for outdoor shooting, hiring a crew, leasing

the equipment, casting, rehearsals, and more. That's all before '*the day*', however many there are, after which comes the final '*Cut! That's a wrap!*', followed by the time, effort, and money required for post-production work, which might take weeks, if not months, or it might never be completed at all. Filmmakers can run out of money sometimes while still in process. They usually mean to pick it back up but then another gig comes along, then another, and then another until it's eventually lost at sea and though maybe not forgotten, for certain never completed.

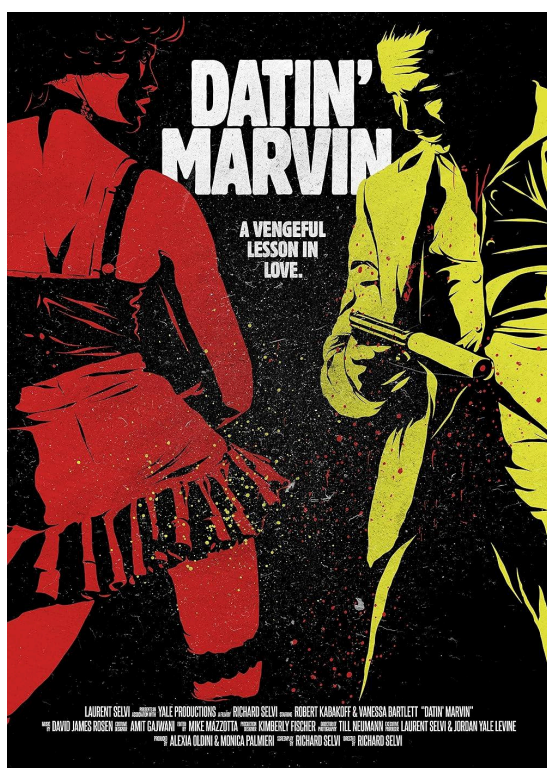
Datin' Marvin was a big deal to me too, so once I was cast, I got on it with my customary zeal, both feet, and went to work drilling down on and memorizing that script, of which at least 80% of the dialogue is Marvin's. Though by then I had developed a successful method, that alone is a project taking some seriously focused work, day after day, pacing the Central Park softball diamonds, script in hand, rehearsing the lines out loud so I, and anybody else in earshot can hear them. I didn't care, it was New York, everybody gets it. Then when ready, bringing in a helpful neighbor serving as a script coach for at least two or three one-hour sessions, in exchange for an IMDb credit which I negotiated on their behalf.

The day before '*the day*' was the sole dress rehearsal, held in the first shooting location where most of the script is set, an old-time, subterranean speakeasy in the Lower East Side, the

real deal. Though no longer peddling the formerly outlawed happy juice, the joint was still around and kicking, serving drinks and dinner along with who knows what else. Despite the rustic appearance of the otherwise nondescript tenement-style brick and concrete, three-story exterior, inside was an elegant, red velvet boudoir with dark paneled walls, brass and mahogany trim, adorned with huge oil paintings, mainly of naked women, on the walls type of joint. It had a well-stocked bar, dark leather sofas and armchairs, a fireplace, a mini-stage with a dancer's pole, an upright piano, and at most ten or twelve tables. Accessible only through a narrow back alley, then down a shadowy stairwell beneath a fire escape that no one would ever be likely to notice unless, of course, like the locations department, they were searching for it.

This would be the first and last time before the shoot that aside from my well-rehearsed scene partner Vanessa, the rest of the cast, crew, and production team would ever hear me doing my lines. The intro of the film is a nearly five-page uninterrupted, decently written monologue dealing with Marvin's take on the subject of truth, lies, women and wishful thinking. The stripper character, Cindy, joins in only at the fourth or fifth, meaning, in other words, it was a lot of work getting off book to do this, and this rehearsal was pretty much the hour before zero hour, so everybody wants to hear and know if and how I've come through. Did I have it? Could I

nail it? Was I gonna freeze (“uh.. *Line, please!*”)? Could I deliver at least as well or better than at the audition when reading off a printed sheet? All attention on me, clock running, I’m now the lynchpin. Well, folks? I killed it. Even, unconsciously letting a little too much Al Pacino into my act, I still knocked it outta the park, Cindy held her own, and everyone was relieved. We’re gonna be able to make this thing. Pressure, yes, but the kind I sought out and was ready to give my all to, all three notes and any others I might have picked up along the way.



The epilogue to this tale: that baby made it all the way to the film festival at Cannes too in 2015, though only as far as downstairs in the Court M  trage. But that ain’t the Baldwin train station to nowhere, far and away from it, and with it, my ‘mark’ (my name in their annual catalog) now etched in twice. *Sacre bleu!*

The Good Boy, nee Quinny (2015)

The callback was held less than a week later, somewhere inspiring near the campus high atop the Morningside Heights section of Manhattan, a location with a commanding and spacious three-sixty view of the upper island, the Hudson River, and the Jersey cliffs. On a late fall day of maximum visibility, in the compact belfry chamber on the twenty-second floor of the landmark Riverside Church tower, a surreal ambience enhanced the grounded reality of our lives and the fantasy of our creation, forming its own unique hybrid of experience.

After narrowing down the casting choices to a precious few, this is when they match an actor in character with the other actors in character, seeing how they fit together, what works, what doesn't, like in Montreal, i.e., what they might need to adjust. A short time after that, once the casting decisions are locked in and a business arrangement is agreed to, everybody gets to work. Then, it's rehearsal, rehearsal, rehearsals. There's no showing up on *the day* unprepared, unless you're a 'name' lead; then you get slack, but aside from that time with Keanu, I've never seen it. Otherwise, if that ever even happens, you probably won't be back the day after that. They'll find a way to either edit your character out or replace the actor and, if necessary, reshoot, there's just way too much competition for these gigs, every department, to put up with any 'B game' performance. That being the unspoken shared

understanding, we all know our jobs, that the clock is running and time is money. Showbiz, again.

The character breakdown in the casting notice read as if someone was thinking of a role for me and wrote a screenplay based in part on that guy, Leroy, 40s, the bar owner—a short-legged, mean-spirited, vulgar ruffian—as a central figure. So when I got to the audition and delivered my natural take, they were all but ‘*blown away*.’ It’s not that I was or am so great; it was the very obvious and natural fit. If I wasn’t or hadn’t actually been *Leroy*, then I certainly had one in me, and just maybe even more Leroy than Leroy himself as conjured by Laura. Later, I was told that before the notice published they had quietly reached out to another iconic role model of mine, none other than the great Mr. Harvey Keitel, for the role. It’s not clear how far they got on that track, but what is clear is it never materialized. Disappointed yet undeterred, it was with palpable relief that they came upon and then quickly settled on me. “*Authentic*” and “convincing” were adjectives thrown my way more than once regarding similar roles, i.e., it was going to work and we all saw that. In fact, so well that when a key actor, Leroy’s foil, had to be replaced at the last minute, it was with my say-so that they gave the final green light.

Why she changed the name from “*Quinny*”, nominally the central character, or certainly the focal point of the other three

characters, to the one she did? One among many of the same title? I have no idea, I think she thought it was a marketing choice. I never asked. But the help I gave her, Alice Laura Lee, the writer and director, mainly script-wise, much was left intact, even after paring down about twenty minutes of footage to the requisite industry standard for shorts, twelve. I gave her as much input as I had to give, and she actually took quite a bit of it, dialogue-wise, and she really didn't have to take none of it, so, for me, it was all gravy on top of the role; I helped make it better, all that creative satisfaction. The opportunity came by way of the evident fact that as an upper west side, Korean-American wife of a Columbia University mathematics professor and mother of at least two grown sons, herself a scholarship-winning violinist, she'd never even been in a low-end gin-mill, let alone witness to the type of scene she was imagining, an ugly barroom brawl. Her take on it came from an agglomeration of films she saw and novels she read, one in particular, "*The Ballad of Pig-Eye*", a short story by Wallace Stegner, which she had us all read before the shoot. Fine, but there were gaping holes, mostly having to do with language, vocabulary, and the setting. For example, with regards to the barroom itself, there was not a single female on the premises, not even a barmaid, or a couple of local, chain-smoking older women out for the night, maybe a barfly/hooker, somebody's ol' lady or daughter, anything, but not one. One of Leroy's lines I contributed, which she totally got, "*Cal? Like Calvin Klein, that famous hairdresser?*" but

got the ax. Okay, fine again. It was her baby, not mine, and my job was to do the best character acting I could. Leroy himself was an amalgam of several real-life characters I crossed paths with (see Volumes I and II), so we work with what we have, and share what we can. There was a suggestion (direction) of hers in the final scene, the end of a brutal barroom brawl, that I pushed back on, but in hindsight, she was right and I regret not seeing it then. Anyway, it's truly a collaboration, intentionally and otherwise, and I think she did a great job, even going as far as to fly in an award-winning DP and his team from somewhere in Latin America, and in the process gave me a moment to play all three notes with all the talent and creative force I could muster, for which I will always be grateful. And it was a Columbia gig, a film school Master's thesis, finally. That gets notice, and when it arrived, it was right on time.

The outcome of that thrilling, hard-working, up at 4AM in January and in Brooklyn on set at the *Trash Bar* by 5:30AM with all three notes humming in a perfect chord four days in a row, was a film that not only am I personally and professionally proud of but the filmmaker herself, that hard-working and talented lady brought it nearly all over the world, and submitted her new baby to enough festivals that for almost certain, it had to win some awards, which it did, at least three, including *Festival de Cine de Castilla la Mancha's Best International Film* and nominated for many more, with

them she could decorate the film promotion poster, and herself.



"Break his fucken' back!" The Good Boy (2015)

Not too shabby for the rest of us either. Oh, and yeah, as a coda to my effort, I even caught a review from some European publication singling me out as *"perfectly cast."* So, there's that 'authenticity', and another mark. Thanks, Laura Lee, way to go, *girl*

But I couldn't suck up. Aye, therein lies the rub.

It's happened, more than once. I drop the ball. Shelton Lee, or as his publicist made him better known, *Spike*, is definitely a man about town and an active player in the industry. In many

senses, I think I get him, or much of him, his work and his public persona. And I like the guy in a qualified way, the *always angry negro* schtick gets a little irritating, but aside that, he has my respect, and may have even had a better shot with him than I gave it, because my problem is, was, I just can't suck up. I'd choke if I tried, even when I'm really not, but it just feels that way. How do I know? Because I have tried several times, and I choked, every time. That's how? Empirically, my dear Watson.

The first time I met him was while making a late-night pickup at JFK when working as a chauffeur for a limo company while holing up at the Koenigsdorf's. Just beginning my actor's life, I was not at all certain which way to go. Anyway, out of the corner of my eye, in a brightly lit but sparsely populated arrivals terminal, I spotted him, also waiting to meet someone and alone. The sudden encounter, of course, took me by surprise. I was already a fan of his, so I started up a conversation about the *Malcolm X* project I knew he was currently in the throes of. He responded as humbly and genuinely to a fan as anyone could have, even agreeing to autograph an 'inner city' street scene postcard quickly bought as a souvenir of the encounter. Though there was an opportunity, I said nothing—nothing at all—about the budding new career direction. It was strictly a two New Yorkers meet at the airport scene: one a well-known and established filmmaker, the other a late-night limo driver on the airport

hustle. That was it. Fine. It was what it was, and I chose not to make any more of it.

Fast forward almost fifteen years later, I'm booked as an extra, a uniformed NYPD cop on his biggest budget project yet, *Inside Man* (2006). This was not going to be a single day gig, rather it will be multiple days, often consecutive, long days, predawn call times, many background actors have to be dressed and propped before breakfast, it's a project by itself, and there would necessarily be lots of overtime and meal-penalties, and the shoot would cover almost the entire summer. It's going to be a series of complex exterior shots including the climactic action scene of the film, a hostage/rescue/bank robbery in lower Manhattan, by Wall Street where the production company has basically commandeered a four square block of crowded, busy urban space, nights and days. Not only is the gig going to generate an ongoing flow of very nice paychecks, but it's also going to be a blast playing cops and robbers with all the best players, actors and best toys. So, all summer long, I'm in his sights. Of course, he's not paying much attention to the film extras, he has ADs for that (see the earlier reference), his focus is primarily on the leads, the big names and the DP, but day after day, again and again, there I am, and there is he. Most, if not all the professional (union) film extras know the set is not really the place for direct self, or career promotion, but it is a great chance to demonstrate work ethic, and be seen, so

there's great potential value just beneath the surface at all times, from checking-in to checking-out.

Anyway, the shoot is the shoot, nothing terribly out of the ordinary except for one notable moment of inherent surrealism. During a chaotic melee outdoors, the climactic action shot, dozens of hostages were escaping the interior as dozens more uniformed cops, backed up by SWAT teams, swarmed the location just outside the bank, physically bringing down the fleeing bad-guy robbers, cuffing them, and taking them away. In the middle of a choreographed scuffle, on the ground wrestling to cuff one of them, I spotted a pair of shoes inches from my face. Looking up, it was the great Willem Dafoe playing the top cop standing alongside me. At that moment, the uncanny surreality brought to the fore by the unexpected appearance of a movie star struck me: I was in the movie *now*, imagining myself in the audience later, watching the film and seeing myself on the screen. I was simultaneously part of the current action and a future observer of it, existing in that hazy land between reality and fiction, a profoundly surreal experience that left an enduring impression, integrated from then on in my conscious experience of filmmaking.

That being the second extended contact I had with the ever-angry auteur. There had been several Spike Lee “joints” I worked background in over the years, and aside from that first one as a union member, “*He Got Game*” (1998), when Boogie

kept me in a dark, sweaty apartment building basement holding area in the Coney Island projects for hours and hours just to let me know who was boss, there's nothing particularly notable to mention, another day, another film set, another paycheck. This time, the third and final, came almost a decade later, just a couple of months after the big film wrapped. It was at the new Apple store on Fifth and Fifty-ninth, some type of promotional event, probably a part of the store's big opening publicity events, and for some reason, I decided to make the scene. *Consumeridice*, I ain't got, so it was probably just out of curiosity, combined with easy access from home, a ten-minute stroll along Central Park South, and a well-earned night out from the gym. After waiting in line outside the immense, lit-up against all white glass cubicles for about twenty minutes, I wandered down the central interior stairwell to the lower level just to get the full tour or spot a new product that might catch my interest, which aside from the original iPod (a big \$500 mistake) nothing they sell ever did. Apple as a brand never thrilled me, and Steve Jobs never grabbed my attention or impressed me one way or another either. In fact, when someone's that popular, I generally go in the opposite direction. It's a gut thing. Whatever. But this guy, Mad Shelly the successful filmmaker, straight outta NYU, he did, and there he was again, seated comfortably by himself just off the center of the subterranean inner space taking in the scene, Shelton "Spike" Lee.

This time I hurried over to and greeted him. Before he could get any “don’t bother me” defenses up, I announced that I had worked on “*Inside Man*,” which brought a quick smile and the signs of interest to his face, “*I was one of the cops.*”

“*Uniformed or SWAT?*” he asked. “*Uniformed,*” and then, with him now lightened up, we began some small chit-chat talk about the film, similar to at the airport: what stage of post-production were they in, what was the intended release date, that type of generic industry dialogue. After a few lively and pleasant back-and-forth exchanges, thinking I had taken enough of his time, I didn't want to seem as if I was pressing, I excused myself and set out to walk away. “*Hey, what’s your name?*” he asked as I turned to leave. I didn’t even have the self-awareness or chutzpah to introduce myself beyond the way I had. It was a perfect chance to introduce myself as an actor, tell him about the contacts we shared in common by then, remind him about the airport meeting and how cool he was to me back then, and the autograph, and then ask him to take a look at some of my work, which by that point there was work to show him. So, I turned back around, smiled, gave him my name, and then left like I had something more important to do just then. Near as I can figure, the pull away from him came from the crazy dread anticipated by the thought I’d be seen as ‘sucking up’, or that it would feel that way. ‘*We’re close enough in age, he and I, and we’re both not kids, so why did I need to ingratiate myself to him? Uh... maybe because he’s in a position to help me achieve my professional goals,*

and just maybe, I have something to offer him as well, and maybe this is the opportunity Providence has provided to grab it? Yeah, I can see that, but what does all that mean? We're two men. He's not my daddy and I'm no one's son. Just leave it alone. I'm not looking for any handout. If he's interested, he'll find me.' That kind of stubborn 'pride' and restraint. The kind that you don't need. But it's happened before, and it happened again.

Darren in the breach.

Sometime in late 2015, with my radar tuned in tight as usual, I caught the whispered word: Darren Aronofsky was shooting a series of cameo shots for use in an outdoor display at the Paris Climate Conference. He needed interesting faces and looks to populate the project with—shots of a variety of people, character types, looking sternly into the camera. These images would be displayed on a number of outdoor screens mounted about the city in key locations, as if to alert the attendees that they were being observed by the world's nameless masses. Their contrived presence was ostensibly intended to exert pressure on the Earth-loving jet-setters to perform in a meaningful way by producing valuable policy outcomes while hobnobbing in the City of Lights. There would be no pay; he was contributing his time and talent, so if we were interested, we would have to be willing to do the same. All it required of

me was getting on my bike and taking the twenty-minute ride downtown from Lincoln Square to Soho where, in a small, rundown neighborhood warehouse space, a hastily set-up studio was waiting, ready for action.



Once there, I fell in with a low-key but growing collection of about twenty New York actors standing around outside, chit-chatting in the cool, dry, pleasant fall air, and for the same purpose. After about a half hour, the production team began calling us inside in groups of three. Once inside, as

instructed, one by one we'd climb up on a tall stool bolted to a 'lazy Susan' platform in front of a blue screen, where after facing the camera in the first position, two PAs would rotate the stool clockwise in a slow three-sixty. When we reached the camera the second time, facing it again, we were to focus in wearing a serious look. Easy enough. He and his team would handle the rest.

The only time I saw him before that was on the set with Mickey and Marissa already detailed, so I had something to say if I took the chance: *'Hey, Darren, my fellow Brooklyn*

Hebrew homie, I worked on The Wrestler and made the final cut! Great film! Maybe even a classic. Thank you for the opportunity. If you ever have a moment, please take a look at my acting work. Here's my card.' That type of well-timed, totally appropriate comment would have been a great starting point for a brief discussion and leaving an impression. This was also, by the way, the reason most, if not all, of the other actors showed up—less about climate, more about career. They weren't holding any Paris Conferences for struggling actors. So, I sat on the stool and had my picture taken, but the moment to break into a quick, private chat with the Oscar-nominated and award-winning director smoothly, like in the elevator with the great gangster film master, never came. Even once I was inside, when of course I had his attention, he spotted me, smiled, and thanked me for showing up with a fist pump, it was still too busy and crowded inside. Though it was close, the right timing wasn't quite there. At one point, still outside, he emerged from the studio while speaking on a mobile phone. Obviously, there was no way to interrupt that. I might have been able to wait until he finished the call before he headed back inside, but he was moving quickly, so I would have had to rush him, and in front of all the others gathered there who were probably managing the same impulses but keeping their cool. Not good. I would have had to interrupt something—him or an aide or the flow, and that's not cool. It would have come off as desperate, not the way I want to be seen, and I wasn't. Or worse still, sucking up.

So, it didn't happen. That 'pride' again, or 'ego' as you might call it. In view of all that, again in the breach, narrow as it was, I choked. Showbiz.

And a ghost story

Of course, it's one thing to 'choke' in a bit of real-life improv when all the world's the stage and Darren Aronofsky's the lead, but no one's watching, or knows, and even if they were and did, actually cares, and quite another to do it on set, on stage, or on an audition where all the opposite holds, and on which I must humbly admit, I never did. In fact, when that type of pressure is on, I tend to drill down and come through, sometimes even better than I might under lesser pressure demanding less resolve. The audition was held at the Chelsea Piers Studios, third floor, the same place as the Law and Order interiors were shot, a place I'd worked many times as an extra, and that time for Eben and the DA, so, I already felt relaxed and comfortable. In fact, it was the same casting director who cast for them, Kevin something or other, an affable Irish-American lad in his thirties, but this gig was for an A&E project, *Celebrity Ghost Stories*, second season, which is kind of a big deal, meaning it got renewed so there was a track record of quality to uphold.

Though it wasn't my first gig for that show, it was the first lead and about time too. That was my attitude. All I knew

about the role was the project title, a lead, the father of the actor Titus Welliver, a painter named Neil who lived in a remote farmhouse and had some type of paranormal encounter. The scene was laid out for me as I sat in his small office just down the hall from the *Law and Order* set, his mini-camera close on me: *“You’re a father, your terrified young son comes running to you swearing he’s just seen a ghost. You don’t see the ghost, but he points to enough evidence of some unexplainable presence that you are beginning to think it just may be possible. Your job, Dad, despite perhaps being a bit shaken yourself by what you’ve just seen and heard, is to calm him down. Go on, ‘Action’. Action!”* Folks, once again with all due modesty, that plays to one of my chief strengths, the gift of gab, and often quite convincingly, especially as I said, when pressed. I even thought of something almost brilliant to throw in, about not seeing the rain but seeing the water-soaked fields, puddles, and dripping trees, something like that—not original, but very well placed. By the end of my three- to five-minute take, he’s visibly delighted, surprised, and impressed. *“We’ll be in touch, Rob. Thanks so much. Have a great rest of your day.”*

The follow-up call came a few days later, checking my availability for the two or three dates set aside for the shoot next week. *“On it,”* I reply, *“Let’s roll.”* And with that, I was booked. The role was Neil Welliver, a fine artist living on a farm in the deep-green hinterlands of Vermont, and as every

storyteller this side of the White Mountains knows, is ghost territory. He's the father of the 'celebrity' Titus, and it's his story, the kid who needed comforting.

When the day came, it was nothing but performance, loving it, this time lightly scripted, so the lines had to be delivered with precision, finesse, and sincerity. The kid actors, the two small brothers and sons, not a stage brat among them, at least not that day, were as game and squared away as I was, meaning we all, crew included, blew it away. All 'A-game'. Titus wasn't bad as himself either, though a bit hammy in my humble opinion, unless that's how he really is, hammy. By the end of the shoot, I almost had myself believing in ghosts, while the real-life allegedly true story that Titus' nightmare was based on is even more horrifying than mere ghostly spirits knocking paint buckets over. Frightening stuff, for real, and I was proud to do it and proud of it.

Full frontal? Seriously?

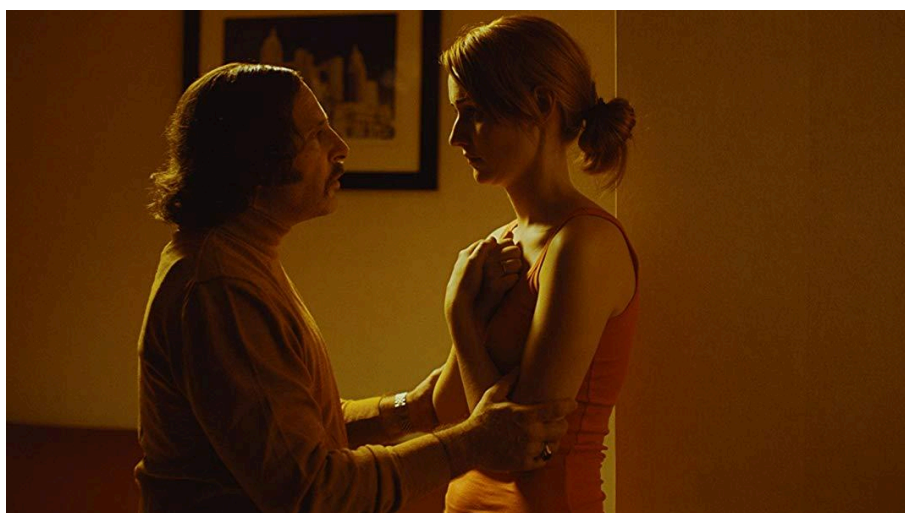
Yes. I'm afraid Steve, the director, was quite serious. I asked him *why?* Why was it necessary? It wasn't porn. "*Realism,*" he explained. "*I fully respect whatever you decide, but that's what we need. I'll call you back in an hour and you can let me know.*" The audition was oddball enough, so it wasn't like a big shock, but taken as a whole, the process so far was indeed

sui generis, at least for me. At the audition, I think it was at Ripley Grier, a popular location in the film district so that gave the production some credibility to me, warranted or otherwise, it was him and two associates, probably producers, female. Instead of a cold reading, or related improv, they wanted me to sing “*Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream...*” as if I were singing it as a lullaby (and keep a straight face). Okay, it was in my range, so I let it rip.

Now that he called, less than a full week later, we got down to the nitty-gritty: my character would be masturbating, and they needed it to be seen. Hmm... Well, think about it I did, it wasn't so appealing, just a matter of professional dignity, but they would be using a prosthetic, and I thought of Mark Wahlberg in *Boogie Nights*, a great film. So if he could get away with it, dignity intact? Then it shouldn't be that big a deal if I did the same. “*Okay, Steve, let's roll.*”

The 2AM call time in a dank, cavernous Chinatown hotel wasn't that much of a surprise either, but it wasn't standard, so, so far, in that sense, everything fit. When I arrived on set, whatever anxiety I carried with me was somewhat assuaged, it looked and felt like a typical indie, all the crews humming, the director greeting me, the PA bringing me to Makeup and Wardrobe, and finally to set where I met the lead. A lovely young actress, who despite her being professional, looked understandably somewhat uncomfortable positioned in a hotel bedroom, in front of the bright-bright camera lights, beneath

the boom, in only her undergarments which she would soon be relieved of. That's all I'm going to say about the scene in the (2015) *Her Composition*, except that when they brought me the prosthetic, I'm standing alongside her, the entire team now seated behind the camera, I picked it up, look at it, then looked at Steve, indicating my disappointment in its modest size, and asked: "*Couldn't you have at least gotten me a black one?*" To which he smiled, the females deadpanned, and we shot the scene.



Client #6 makes his move in *Her Composition* (2015)

Fast forward a few months later to the film's release, I must admit, that by then, I was in dread. The relief I felt assuaged on set dissipated long before, and all I could think of is how terribly that would impact my so-called 'legacy', a crude mark in an otherwise respectable career. Watching the film now, from the opening, braced for the worst, there had already been one scene with another actor displaying his maleness, in full,

so when mine came up, that element was deftly glossed over. There didn't need to be two such scenes, as that might rightfully come off as gratuitous, so, thank Stephan Litgger and lord Dionysis, it's still a bit racy, but my dignity was spared, and the film still hit its mark. So, for me, chalk it up as another contribution I remain proud of. Watch it and see, it's showbiz, everyone. If I can enthusiastically blow people's brains out or choke them to death with a plastic bag, I can surely denude a female and have my way with her intimates while maintaining all the racy dignity that suggests. Showbiz.

I steal...

A final gig, among many worth reporting but a standout in its own right, was for another outfit from out on the West Coast producing for TruTV who were headed east to shoot the following month. To begin with, the audition was almost as much fun to perform as the gig was to shoot. By this time, 2012, upon request, auditions were frequently self-taped by the actor and then submitted electronically to the casting department. The benefits of that arrangement are as varied as they are many, from the ability of the actor to control the final outcomes, i.e., the video, to saving time, money, and travel. They asked for a skit wherein a shoplifter has been caught and held by store security, who tries to exculpate himself by talking his way out of it, offering excuses, one after the other, each growing more desperate and absurd. Fun, right?

Especially so given my experience in that real-life drama (see Vol. II), so I set up my makeshift but comfortably convenient home studio, with a solid background provided by a sheet draped over my clothes closet, sufficiently lit, adequate sound with video provided by a decent camera, and got to work.

One by one, as described, the excuses got more far-fetched, and his demeanor more implausible, strained, and stressed, beginning with announcing the credible fact that he was an ophthalmologist with enough money to make purchases, so no need to steal anything, opening his wallet to display several hundred-dollar bills, to the utterly absurd, blaming his larcenous behavior on lycanthropy.

Just over a month went by, and I didn't hear from them, which, despite that sage advice given by the two seasoned actresses way back when, the gig came to mind again and again. Why? Because my audition was so damn good. Seriously, one of my best. *How could they not cast me? Johnny Depp's not gonna do this.* Shortly after I'd just about written it off, I got the email. They were shooting on lower Broadway, and next Tuesday, my call time was 11AM. The pay was good, and the paperwork would be filled out on set. Great. Now, the world made sense again.

I'd never been to *Yellow Rat Bastard*, a clothing store basically for college-age 'hipster' types, the skateboarder set,

but I could tell right away from the outside and the large square footage of the place that it was very popular beyond that limited niche. That meant there was a significant share or more of shoplifting going on. The premise of the show, *Caught Red-Handed*, was a two-man team of professional security men (exactly what I studied at John Jay), would set themselves and their equipment up out of sight and do surveillance until they caught a few would-be shoplifters and left the store with an updated system for continuing that trend, cutting down on losses until eventually, hopefully, dissuading future thieves.

Outside, in the back of the building, on a lower-key street that ran parallel to Broadway, were parked the company vehicles: two large white passenger vans and a trailer. Once I spotted them and signed in, the first AD broke it down for me: the two security guys would not be told who the thief was (me) and I would follow instructions given to me over a tiny earphone by the 2nd AD as to where in the store to position myself, when to and what to take. The deal was for them to try to spot and stop me on their own. My job, aside from following instructions, was to be as discreet as possible so as not to let them. They choreographed the general moves for me before the first take: a right down this aisle, a left across the storefront space to another aisle, then into a somewhat secluded corner where I'd strip off my own shirt and start putting on the store's T-shirts, four or five of them, one on top

of the other until I put my original shirt back on and headed out of the store wearing them all. If the security guys doing the video surveillance in the backroom spotted me, fine, we'd take it from there. Then, of course, they'd have to try to stop me, but they'd have to wait until I actually left the premises, or if they failed to even spot or catch me, we'd have to shoot again. Within the hour of my arrival, on the '*Action*' call over the earpiece, it was game-on.



The “tye-dyed shoplifter” for *Caught Red-Handed* (2012)

Sure enough, with my (dated but still relevant) wealth of experience in that field, they never spotted me. Even after the second take, I still eluded their detection, and the store wasn't even very crowded that early on a springtime weekday. For the third, they were informed: “*That guy, in the fisherman's cap.*” Now, the two ‘loss prevention’ security guys had to be actors and act like they actually spotted me. Fine. Cool. It wasn't Shakespeare in the Park, and by the end of the third

take, we nailed it. The thing was, since I could only be stopped after leaving the store property, they had to give me a head start ‘at the gate.’ After standing in faux nonchalance at the store’s entrance for a beat or two, as if subtly making sure I hadn’t been tailed, I suddenly broke into a fast sprint up Broadway into the broad daylight of a busy lunchtime urban canyon, with two security men and two or three cameras in close hot pursuit. I timed my bolt just at the right speed to look convincing while allowing the posse to catch and tackle me to the pavement (just like old times). The handheld steady cams covered the make-believe drama from all angles, and all this was in plain public view, with most people not knowing it was contrived—a TV show. To add even more personal drama complexity, this was a neighborhood full of casting companies, production companies, agents, actors, and talent managers, who just might spot me but also not necessarily catch the cameras, or catch them but not get the whole picture, so there was that. Unlikely as it may have been, it’s not entirely far-fetched.

For months, expanding into years, the segment frequently repeats. Acquaintances at the gym, strangers in the street, and even some friends would ask either, “*Are you an actor? I saw you on that shoplifting show!*” or, “*Rob, were you really stealing? T-shirts? What’s up with that?*” And I would light up, laugh, smile, then explain the situation. Meanwhile, who knows how many others saw the show but never asked, either

because they don't know me or know me but never had the chance. So, it's out there, the '*tie-dyed shoplifter*' in all his stolen T-shirt glory, for better and worse, portrayed by yours truly, *bigrobtheactor*.

CHAPTER XII: *bigrobtheactor*

“Gangster royalty”



Along with all the extra work—stage plays, scripted and unscripted television work, student films, low-budget shorts, occasional bit parts, and small roles in feature films, a pretty cool collection of music videos, at least thirty-six twenty-eight minute episodes of my bigrobtheactorTV cable show—along with my lovely, talented, and a lot of fun co-hostess, Young Lady Beth (you have to see her to believe her), produced with and broadcast by a truly terrific outfit, the Manhattan Neighborhood Network, and soon webwork, there was still a relentless

hunger to reach beyond where I had imagined back under that train station platform. In fact, at least on paper, I already had, by wide margins, but it never completely felt that way. There was still work left undone, but I wasn't quitting. Far from it. Never even considered it. To imagine that I'd not only be admitted to the Screen Actors Guild and later vested, having earned a pension, that I would have worked with many of the most talented and top-of-the-line players, brightest stars, and highest earners in the industry, and even been '*traveled*' internationally to shoot as the lead in big-budget production twice, was not only way beyond my original targets but even arguably surpassed my current ones. Still, I was not done. This wasn't it. Every time I reached a goal, the bar would set itself higher. I had to have and do more.

Now, to specifics. Ever since my blessed grandmother, Mom-Mom, and I watched those old Cagney, Bogart and Robinson films in glorious, timeless black and white, and ever since Ocean Parkway and the Jets who kept telling me another test and another meeting was necessary before my admission was to be sanctified, yes, I always wanted to play the role of a cool, bad guy who embraced abandon and threw regard for anything other than his own reckless desires to the wind by forcing his will on the meek waiting for their Christian inheritance. These guys weren't waitin' for nothin'. Those guys were taking theirs now. Okay, I was a little mixed up about which was the best path forward, see my earlier

volumes, but when it came along and landed, it was clear I finally had it right.

It's the set of "*Music and Lyrics By*" (2007), starring Hugh Grant and that famous little cutie Drew Barrymore, daughter and granddaughter of Hollywood royalty. The scene's a ten-year high school reunion party held in a large catering hall ballroom, everybody's having a light-hearted bash, with us extras playing, you guessed it, the attendees. At least one hundred or more of us, union and non-union mixed in, and including principals and crew? It's a big set, a three-day shoot at one of the better-known, larger midtown hotels, which meant a fat paycheck, a lot of fun, and an easy commute for me to boot. I could walk there in less than fifteen minutes, taking my time. Less fantastically, it was also over the Passover seders, both, and then another day, so I was torn. Pragmatism won out and I took the gig, figuring *it's a freelance lifestyle, I never know from where or when the next dollar is gonna roll in, so take the job, chalk it up, and keep your bills current.*

The first day on set, after Hair, Wardrobe, and Makeup, Props handed us those blank, white cardboard ID cards you write your name on, then slip inside a clear plastic envelope and clip to your lapel. So, without much thought, I wrote 'Big Rob' as a goofy, fun, and a bit of an ironic high school nickname, especially for a guy who barely registers at five and a half feet

tall, but I went with it and put it on. Why not? It's movie-making, not commodity trading, so let's have fun. Soon, I discovered that when just about everyone saw and read it, then looked at me and smiled, it landed. Not long after, because of that reliable reaction, people in the business started calling me 'Big Rob'. Thus, it stuck, becoming my professional nickname, 'bigrobtheactor.' I even bought the domain. All that's a minor historic footnote aside to say that I spent much of the three days trying to get as close to Ms. Barrymore as possible, which on a few occasions, while we were both doing camera crosses on a crowded, semi-chaotic set, we ended up spontaneously navigating toward each other's paths, which I tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to repeat deliberately without it being obvious. But, either way, hit or miss, I was feeling her, that talented and successful cutie. Big time. Big Rob meets Baby Drew, right? I could see it.

A word of caution here: that type of endeavor, flirting with a female lead, can result in both wanted and unwanted reactions. 'Wanted' would be those unforgettable smiles from Raquel Welch, and another from Sandra Bullock, or being sat down next to by J-Lo, or, as in the case of Meg Ryan, her security guy getting quietly in my face, checking me out, as if I may have been an off-the-charts threat. Understandable, but not pleasant. So, if you find yourself in that position, proceed with caution.

But romcoms ain't my thing. I wanted fear and firepower, threats and menace, sharkskin suits, tailored shirts with cufflinks made of human molars (see Meyer Wolfsheim), Gucci loafers and slicked-back hair. So, when the call came in from some dude saying he was from NBC checking my availability for background work on a promo for *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* airing on *Saturday Night Live*, a parody of the iconic Goodfellas scene where Henry introduces the viewers to the assembled wiseguys at a bar, they wanted me for a cast member in that crowd, I didn't have to think about it, not even about the rate. It didn't matter. Only doing it mattered. "*Of course. Thank you. I'll be there.*" The only rub might have been that it was an AFTRA gig, but since the two unions merged a few contentious years before, that meant I could work AFTRA gigs without ever having to pony up that \$1,200 and kick up those semi-annual dues to people who don't do much more than take it from you. The pay would be whatever the contracted rate was, and wardrobe fitting would be the week before at studio headquarters, 30 Rock, from where the last time I was politely but firmly escorted out by building security. Fun! Look who's back!

Midtown Manhattan, the set, an afterwork business casual joint about two streets over from 30 Rock—they closed down the entire two-floor restaurant for half a day. It turns out there are about twenty background players specifically called in by the show's in-house casting to essentially look the part and

follow direction. Granted, we all looked like wiseguys, every one of us, or goomars, or wives of wiseguys, no questions asked. In fact, to me, it seemed many of us appeared more relaxed and natural made-up like that than we did as ourselves in real life; it was great; they really put it together. I mean, you know, it's NBC; they have the resources, so my carefully selected costume jewelry fit just right, and my wardrobe was impeccably tailored. I was it, looking in the mirror—if not a ‘don’, then surely a ‘capo’ on a night out with the wives and crew, “*For the apparel oft proclaims the man,*” imparting said wisdom from the father to his son, so bring on the cameras, *I proclaim, therefore I am!*

After positioning eight of us around an upper-floor, back-of-the-room dining table, we’re told the shot will open on us laughing hysterically at an off-camera joke Jimmy Fallon just told—the absolute funniest we ever heard in life. Easy enough. A moment or two later, just as we began taking our seats, Fallon enters the set, heading right towards us to take his first position, facing us, back to the camera. He happened to land almost exactly where I was still standing, so as soon as he hit the mark and immediately greeted us, and since I was still standing there, only inches from him, I extended my right hand to say ‘hello’ and express some sort of excitement and gratitude, but he doesn’t respond—nothing. He doesn’t budge, doesn’t even look. Either he doesn’t see me or is ignoring me. I’m like right at shoulder level, inches from him with my hand extended into his personal space at waist

level, and in front of the other seven watching the sudden little mini-moment unfold.

Incidentally, the same thing happened with Tom Cruise on the set of “*Vanilla Sky*” (2001), but I later discovered it was the heavy plastic face makeup blocking his vision that accounted for the awkwardness. In fact, he was a very personable dude, like Travolta; this I saw repeatedly during the week spent on the War of the Worlds set, a four-square block chunk of downtown Patterson, New Jersey carved out exclusively for the shoot. For example, two local women, middle-aged neighborhood ladies, bathrobes and hair-curlers types, all giggly like it was high school, summoned all the chutzpah they could get their arms wrapped around, evaded the barricade, and ran to him. As soon as they got talking close, he and his two bodyguard assistants stopped walking—they were escorting the star back to the trailer for a break after the last take, but instead of having them held at bay, at least the customary six feet, he invited the women to pose with him while one of the handy bodyguards took the shots using one of the lady's cameras. Just as cool as the Stallone one, but more wholesome and inspiring to see. He took a valuable minute or two (chi-ching!) of his and the studio's to create a story for those two Patterson, New Jersey chicks that they can tell forever and a cool picture to prove it. With Fallon? I couldn't really tell. He wasn't wearing a prosthetic face, but that stubborn streak of mine kicked in. So, hand still extended, I edged in slightly closer towards him, making it all but

impossible for him to continue ignoring me without having it be even more weirdly obvious. After an awkward, motionless, and silent beat or two, still facing the table, without making eye contact, he looks over his right shoulder, then downwards toward my hand and takes it. That was something of a tension breaker, but it was still a strange encounter. (*Who the fuck does this douchebag think I think he is? Johnny Carson? Dick Cavett? Jack Paar? Forget any of that. He barely makes the square root of Captain Kangaroo in my world. I never watched his show and barely knew his face from Kimmel's.*) Anyhow, now sort of shaking his hand, it was soft, warm, and damp—no grip, zero, like room temperature Jell-O—‘clammy.’ So maybe that’s why. Or ‘germaphobic.’ Who cares? Right? I’m just reporting the experience. Let the record show, now and forever, Captain Kangaroo's third mate, what's-his-name, was rude and has clammy, soft hands.

The important thing is that the shoot went great, a first-class, round-trip ticket, all the way. They even shifted me to a second position so I’d be featured on camera twice, in both the opening and closing seamless, Scorsese-style steady-cam single shot, like magic. The second time, I was seated right behind a well-known New York restaurateur who was also a lesser-known but successful screen actor.

Back at the wardrobe fitting a few days before, I crossed paths with the guy, a New York pseudo-celebrity who had a recurring principal role on *The Sopranos* I’ll call Mario, for a

second time. He co-owned a well-known, opaquely exclusive, hole-in-the-wall, family (like Five Families) restaurant at the edge of East Harlem. We had very close appointment times and occasionally they run late, meaning there's often a backup, which in this case resulted in the two of us waiting outside in the fitting room hallway together. I'd met the dude once before at his restaurant a couple of years earlier, when he wouldn't let me and my wingman, a state senator from south of the Mason-Dixon, have a seat at any table, not even an open one. We could sit at the bar, where he greeted us, drink all night, and even be served up there—there's the menu—and spend money, and be welcomed. But a table? Not happening. Not tonight, probably not any night. The tables are reserved long, long in advance by a discrete community of semi-regular notables, like Frank Sinatra and Rudy Giuliani, Darryl Strawberry, Bill Bratton, Liza Minnelli and Donald Trump, and their friends. That level of notable, and you two don't appear to be either, capisce, *paesano*? Like that. Nothing personal. It's the back of the bus or you don't ride at all. Okay, his joint, his rules, we got it, it's called 'private property.' And better still? He didn't remember.

That particular awkwardness came as no surprise; I'd done some homework on the place as soon as my wingman pal from out-of-town mentioned it—it was the first time it ever came to my attention—but the pal (now a US congressman) thought he could schmooze his way to a table, without any reservation at all, right there and then, on demand, just by

introducing himself and the strength of his title, handing out a business card. So he was taken aback somewhat by the polite inflexibility, accustomed as the senator was to a bit more deference way down in Dixie. Mario didn't care that he was a state senator; he might not even have cared if he was a US senator. It was just like that, and that's how it was gonna stay.

While we were waiting around up there, I related a second story about another real-life event that happened not too long ago at his restaurant that would make for a great, great film if someone talented wrote a worthy script: a neighborhood guy, an old-time wannabe, never 'made', always an 'associate', basically still an entry-level numbers runner in his sixties, guns down a young, up-and-coming hot shot, a 'made' guy, and possible future capo, shot dead in cold blood over an exchange of petty insults, right in the middle of the joint in front of a packed house, including top-level city officials, off-duty detectives, pro athletes, entertainers, and wiseguys, an Al Hirschfeld festival of personalities and types. Mario was surprised I knew that story, then got palpably defensive, like I was an FBI undercover working a case, or maybe some type of rat trying to set him up, and dismissively told me he'd never give permission for that to be shot at his place. I explained it was only the inspiration for a feature film idea, not a documentary; it was a great story, to which he eventually, reluctantly nodded, agreeing it would be. Then I added that it could be shot anywhere with a similar ambiance and character, didn't have to be his joint, but he was on

auto-huff mode like it was some type of insult, or what, I don't know. I read about the shooting in vivid detail in the New Yorker, so it was hardly a secret.

But fine again. Who cares? I'm not coming to your fucking hole-in-the-wall restaurant again anyway, paesano. You could give me ten tables and comp the bill, and for today, amigo, we're both here, same place, same time, same status.

Background. So spare me the indignant performance, and the over-cooked pasta paranoia, Mario. I'm from right here, Manhattan, not Memphis. Let's just relax and have some fun. That was my take during the shoot, and that's how it was gonna stay.

Word on the checkout line was it would air a single time during next weekend's Saturday Night Live, once, and that would be it, a wrap, meaning if we wanted to catch it, that's the heads-up. Come that Saturday night, I'm seated with my good buddy and neighbor Ben at the edge of his bed, my eyes and his ears glued (Ben lost his sight in his forties) to the boob-tube screen in front of us, watching the show, waiting for it to come on. Would it? Yes? No? Maybe? Maybe another in my long history of SNL washouts? If "yes," how did it come out? Would I be identifiable? Seen as more than a split-second smudge like in *American Gangster*? You never know with these things until you see them, so it's always an edgy moment, "*the thrill of victory, the agony of defeat*" type of drama. It's the third commercial break already, pressure

growing, anxiety building. I told everyone I knew again, just like the times before, then suddenly, that explosive brass! Whammo! And there it is, the laughter, funniest joke they ever heard, “*Rags to Riches*,” it’s a perfect fit. The whole thing was a five-star television satire promo, even what’s-his-name? Kimmel? Carson? He did great too, a real *mammaluc* dreaming about hosting a TV show. And there goes me again, not once, but twice, just passin’ through, livin’ the life, live from New York.

By this time, I was hip enough to multi-media dynamics to know to race to their website, catch it online just after it aired, and capture it as is, because the next day? As I anticipated, they swapped out the perfect music for another generic tune similarly arranged but without that sudden brassy ka-pow, something they didn’t need permission for, and it made a huge difference, and not for the good. The right music is critical, and the masters of the art of filmmaking know this, thus the bold testosterone-driven brass of “*Rags to Riches*” as we watch the ‘*goodfellas*’ enjoying their day in the sun.

Fuggedaboudit. Bullseye. That night they musta’ just took and ran with it for the one-and-done broadcast, the one that counted, or maybe they licensed for that single event, or figured correctly they could get away with it just once, who knows? But know this: it is now preserved forever and a day on the eponymous *bigrobtheactor* YouTube channel, intact as the time it aired, where it continues to attract views, none of

which, by the way, do I see a dime for. Who cares even about that? Our licenses and permission? *We don't got no permission. We don't got to show you no stinkin' licenses.* It was another mark for the record of my slow evolution into that screen gangster me and Mom-Mom imagined.

Detours and deadends

Of course, at every new level up, you start at the bottom where a lot of basic lessons get taught. Some call it the school of hard knocks; I called it an actor's life. The casting notice is for a lead in a feature film about a middle-aged wiseguy who chooses to leave the life. He's not being run out by the competition or threatened by the cops; he's had some type of personal epiphany that leads him to decide it's over. He wants something new. What new thing is it? He's not sure; it hasn't revealed itself yet, but the one he's been leading, even after having reached the level of capo, he wants out of. In that sense, the destination is vague, but the direction is clear, and somehow, even promising. Okay, sounds thoughtful, challenging, and fun; I can connect with it, so I submit. He invites me to his apartment on East Fourteenth, where this early-forties Italian-American guy, let's call him Matthew, wearing an ascot under his button-down shirt and with a striking dark-eyed character look himself, and his lovely-looking and sharp-eyed early-thirties Asian lady friend,

let's call her Mindy, share the space—a good-looking couple, and from all appearances, both are serious, talented, and prepared. Shooting a feature film, even for a major studio, is a huge, expensive, and complex task, so for independents? Well, even on a smaller scale there are a lot more obstacles, so a full commitment is at least the bottom line and they appear right and ready, fully engaged and equipped.

After handing me the sides, he takes a seat across the living room on a sofa, then on “*Slate for the camera. Action!*” Mindy begins rolling video. After only a single take of a cold reading, no adjustments, he looks surprised and noticeably pleased, thanks me, then they both walk me to the door and wish me a good night. Either that same night or the next he calls to offer me the gig, “*think Ben Gazzara,*” he advises. Matt knew what he wanted. Perfect for me, and very flattering. He has the first scene written, funded, crew hired, location locked down, and now that he is fully cast, after a single rehearsal, will be ready to shoot sometime at the end of the following week. It will be used as a marketing device, a pitching tool seeking more and greater funding. Routine practice. We agree on a fairly standard non-union (I’ve already gone *ficore*, I’ll get to that) day rate, then he sends me the full eight-page script for the scene. It is well-written, interesting, tightly choreographed and detailed—a lengthy monologue punctuated at key intervals with drinks served and lines from the two other scene characters, his two top soldiers,

who he has called to his home heating oil business office so he can advise them of his decision, which has a very direct bearing on their earnings. It's not good news; there will likely be a turf war over the usual rackets, mainly extortion, gambling, and numbers, and it will be costly either way. As usual at this level, most of the copy is mine. So, I get to work. And I mean *work*.

Long story short here, the shoot was difficult, challenging indeed, all those lines, more than ninety percent mine, and he had extremely involved, intricate, and precise ideas about the physicality of the scene. For example, the way shot glasses would be arranged on the tray, then the desk, how they were poured and served, the order, hand gestures, body language in concert with the lines, lighting, sound, and camera angles. It got a bit tense for me, holding back an “*Alright already, goddammit!*” I had to assume there was a point to all that, and not simply another case of *directoridice*, Otto Preminger meets Federico Fellini in this first-time filmmaker, but he was paying us, and we got it done, despite a lot of sweat, tempers edgy, and frustration building under pressure. We wrapped it up, were paid, and life went on.

Long story short again, it turned out, after weeks expanded into months, that Matt, a grade school teacher in his day life, never went to film school, never worked on a film set in any capacity, and never shot anything before—not a short, not a

trailer, not a promo, not even a home video. Yet, somewhere along the line, he decided to and convinced himself that he could write, direct, shoot, and produce a full-length feature as his first project and basically do it on his own, with a little help on audio from Mindy on the boom and a pothead DP he got from who knows where. Lesson heading my way, not really knowing much better, and not seeing the unlikelihood of that succeeding, at least not right away, I was pulled in by my own wishful thinking, the thrill of doing it, a lead, and of course, the pay, modest though it was. I called these remunerations ‘*pennies from heaven*’, which qualified for me, my ‘*professional actor*’ objective. Anything else was gravy.

We shot five or six or more scenes over the next few months. He’d work his day gig, save up some money, do more writing, and proceed by organizing another shoot day. With that, things seemed to be going mostly okay, except for one minor fact: I was the only experienced actor in the cast. The other guys were, like the director, starting out way ahead of themselves, their experience level never matched the demands of the task, and it was pulling me down. I don’t care for *down*. I care for *up*. For example, you show up on time. For example, you show up off book. For example, you don’t ask “*When’s lunch*” as soon as you get to set. For example, you bring your sides to set. For example, actors don’t yell “*Cut!*” during scenes because they think it’s time to. Seriously, it’s like that.

My two frequent scene partners, soldiers, were talented enough and perhaps looked the part, and after throwing a few shit fits their way on set, they began to shape up. However, when he added other members of the cast, like the old guy who owned the hardware store down the block from Matt's apartment to play a role so he could use the hardware store as a set location without paying for it, it got rocky.

Unsurprisingly, the guy was not at all equipped to do this. He's not an actor, not even an aspiring actor, and only agreed to do it because he was made to believe he could pull it off and it might be fun.

Matt had written a complicated scene for my character, one of the underlings, and the hardware guy, an older European immigrant chap, including a bit of almost slapstick, physical comedy—the soldier lifting the shop owner up off his feet by the neck—like it was suddenly a different movie that should have been performed with the help of a stunt coordinator and by two adequately vetted actors. At least twice before the meltdown, I sat with him and his DP over coffee and gently explained to them that I couldn't work on a project operating at that level. It brings me down, it doesn't inspire me, it hurts me, and I won't tolerate it ongoing. It was more than a heads-up; it was fair warning. I was pretty clear, and though they may have paid lip service to my complaints and warnings, nothing along those lines changed, even after raising my pay. In fact, Matt showed me an early clip, and

what I saw was deeply uninspiring, almost comical, not dramatic, not enough to quit over, but headed in that direction. Another push.

Off to a bad start; on that final day, the call time was 9AM, like we were working at a bank or school, then right away broke for breakfast. Bad. It was the scene in the hardware store. As I said, a complicated scene, decently enough written if you accept the notion of a now-degraded capo getting his hands directly involved, but it required three competent actors, especially with that oddly placed bit of physical comedy. I bit my tongue and kept up with it all day, the best I could for as long as I could, trying hard to make it work, but after hours and hours over days and weeks struggling to learn the lines until finally getting them down, again nearly all of them mine, after every miscue, fumbled line, or technical glitch, it felt like a real slap in the face. Breakfast? Seriously? Yes. Matt was serious. Food came first. Now, very rocky.

By about 3PM, after meeting a few other neighborhood pals of his who stumbled by—more nonactors who, according to them, he had promised roles to—and with the hardware guy continually flubbing it, I'd had it, and finally blew up, sky high, grabbing my gear and storming off the set yelling, "*Keep the money.*" Mindy got it, in fact she was waiting for it, but Matt was astonished, wondering why I was so upset, as if he completely disregarded every warning I gave, so, as a final

clarifying and charitable gesture, and after taking and causing a huge loss for everyone, I shouted, “*You're putting me on his level! Capisch? Next time hire actors.*” And with that, thankfully Mindy wasn’t there that day, my impression was that she already bailed and probably for similar reasons, I was wrapped.



A fun crew but not-ready-for feature film work players, and me, miscast.

From that point on, anybody, unless it’s a well-known production company, who wanted to hire me had to pass my due diligence, which up until then, was lax, perhaps a remaining fragment of the older *klipa*. No more, and no mark left from that set either. If it's not NBCUniversal, they need to work at the same standards of professionalism, budgets notwithstanding. It's doable and mainly about another universal: work ethic. Okay. Just another hard knock for both

of us, lesson learned. If life offered ‘do-overs’ I would have tried harder to at least stick it out for the day (it was already 3 pm), and then made my ultimatum before the next shoot, but once Kabbo stepped in, it was all over, a *fait accompli*.

“Do I consider myself a rat? Absolutely.”

That’s why I respect the guy, Frank Cullotta. No apologies, no finesse, no excuses, just the meat and potatoes straight up. In a word? Sincerity, for good or bad. And he paid a steep price for his cold-blooded sincerity, half a life spent behind bars, in a cage alongside the other wild animals who take what they want, no matter who it hurts or how. Yeah, a “*rat*”. That’s what they call it when you get caught, then turn on your confederates by ‘*ratting them out*’ to the cops to lighten your penalty, like a desperate, conscienceless, cornered rat.

Anyway, when I say well-known production company, to my thinking, the *Discovery Channel* fits. Okay, not a production company per se, but even better, a network, a global one that contracts with local production companies, meaning as good a reference as necessary. When the invite came from Liz Lewis Casting, I didn’t know or really remember what role or for which gig, but just by it coming from her office, I knew it was good stuff because that’s all they handled, quality projects. A

few weeks before I had submitted for another one of the endless gangster/crime hybrid productions that mix documentary-style reporting with dramatic recreations, which in my view, and having done quite a few, came out pretty respectably, especially in terms of production quality and even in many cases, enriching content. *The Travel Channel's* hit series *Mysteries at the Museum* kept me turned on and creative by casting me in a range of characters from Jim Bowie of Alamo fame in his last minutes, right before Santa Anna stormed his bunker, wheezing from tuberculosis while preparing his men for their grand finale firefight, improvising a monologue “*This one's for the good lord and Texas*” to the nineteenth-century abolitionist minister Henry Ward Beecher preaching to his choir about the evils of slavery to the surfer-dad who rescued Bethany Hamilton from that shark.

And now? Frank Cullotta, an enforcer for the ‘*Chicago Outfit*’ and childhood pal of Tony “*the Ant*” Spilotro, an Outfit ruthless maniac and man in charge, while they had their hooks bone-deep in a few of the major hotels, the “skim”, and virtually all the profitable street crime in Las Vegas, from burglary to extortion. Each gig was a gas, I mean a five-star Halloween bash all the way. What can I say? One time I played a beekeeper who revolutionized the process of extracting and marketing honey, which brought the production cost and selling price down to where it could be consumed by the working class. Before him, Lorenzo Lorraine Langstroth,

another minister as well as innovator, it was a rare and expensive delicacy consumed only by the wealthy. For that shoot, upon request, I agreed to get into the nineteenth-century beekeeper's suit and handle a live swarm of bees nested in his manufactured hive. I told them, “One take” (which they needed for close-ups and inserts), and that's all it took.



Jim Bowie's last stand at the Alamo, for Travel Channel

Playing extraordinary people in front of a camera, preserved for all the world to see while using the best props, wardrobe, locations, tech, writing, acting, and directing talent a major network producing very successful shows like *Mysteries at the Museum* can provide? It was just like as a kid up on the roof with the Poliandro boys playing Jason and the Argonauts and Hercules with tin foil sword fights, only ten times better. A thousand times better if you count getting paid for it. Anyhow, the Liz Lewis call was for one of the hundreds of gigs I

submitted for just that month alone (only a slight exaggeration), so when the calls come in, it's not always clear right away which submission it was in response to, like with the NBC promo gig, so my enthusiasm was tempered, but once I got into the details, it cleared up. The casting notice posted half a dozen photo images of the wiseguys they were profiling, each one 'turned,' i.e., a rat, with his own episode, telling his side of the story, seeking actors who resembled them to perform them as the real guy narrates for this six-episode mini-series, *Mobster Confessions*. To my eyes, none of them matched me, but as I learned early on, ignore that and submit anyway, like Chief Barnes, just take it one step at a time. Don't disqualify myself: if I think I can bring something of value to the project, submit. And lo and behold, here it was, an invite to come down and read for a role, Frank Cullotta. Now I was psyched!

All I knew about Frank was that he was a real-life wiseguy; he 'turned' and was later hired by Scorsese for his magnum opus, "*Casino*" (1995), as a consultant. So, I dressed the part – less Ben Gazzarra-style, more Vegas in the 70s key, wearing my \$300 gold-tinted Dunhill sunglasses and a multi-colored silk collared sport shirt, but just as serious and committed to the life as the role in the project I stormed out of a few weeks before.

When I got to the casting, somewhere in the Flatiron District loft (not her permanent office), upstairs in the waiting room, after checking in, instead of sitting, I casually paced back and forth while observing and listening to what was going on both inside the casting room and outside in the waiting area. There were five or six other candidates, similar in age and look to me. In fact, to my eyes, they really, really looked the part, and in my experience? Some of them probably were, or very close to it, possibly associates themselves (everybody wants to be on TV), so I felt the rush of the adrenaline challenge. This wasn't going to be an easy sell, and I knew very little about the character they had in mind for me or what I was going to have to do once in there. There were no sides available to prepare with or provide any useful clues, but that heightened tension was all before I wandered close enough to the audition room door and heard the guy inside – the competition – doing his thing.

What I heard put me right at ease. These guys weren't actors. For sure, they were either the real thing or wiseguy wannabes, and with my real-life experience, I figured I was enough of both. In fact, two of NYPD's finest (two black chicks) just stopped a fistfight between me and a speeding bicyclist I knocked off his ride in Columbus Circle on my way to the audition (the guy was playing 'chicken' with me on the street and it didn't end well for him), so I was already in character.

They call me in. It's Angela behind the desk. She's the casting director handling the project for Liz. Along with her cameraman, she tells me to use him as my eye-line (focal point). I know her from previous visits to the main office, dropping off my headshot, an acceptable standard (mostly useless) practice to stay on their radar. She's a blonde, in her thirties, Rubenesque, professional, and personable. I'm relaxed. She explains the scene: *You're a top wiseguy enforcer. It's nighttime, you are paying your target, an indicted associate suspected of going rat, a threat that needs elimination, a visit, a final one. Knocking at his front door, you present your unexpected appearance as benign. You need to discuss a new score, a social call, whatever, but you need to be let in so you can take him out. You play it smooth, like you just want to come in for a casual cup of coffee type of thing, or a drink, but this is not an ordinary event and the target knows it. House calls at this level are rare, and seldom good; your meetings are mostly conducted in public or semi-public spaces, so the associate senses this is probably not something good, but if he's wrong, refusing you entry is a rash move that might bring its own consequences. Using smooth talk to relax him so he invites you in, which gradually succeeds, and in you enter. Once inside the home, walking behind him as he leads you down the hallway towards the living room, you check to see there is no one else there, no family, no other guests, no witnesses, casually asking "Anyone home?" Once that is determined, he is alone, that's basically it. You draw from*

behind him and blow his brains out. Got it? It's an improv. Any questions? No? Good. Ready on 'action.' Okay? Action! Pardon the pun, but I killed it. I'd been patiently waiting and working hard for a long time to get into that room, and there I was. So, that's where I brought it, even using a little humor to ease my way in: "*C'mon, Jerry, you got me standing out here like a pizza delivery guy waiting for a tip*". Bang. Avenue X and Ocean Parkway all the way, now I was in the Jets (Vol. I) with a little Long Beach, New York thrown in for extra flavor. Later on, on set, one of the producers told me that he was told by casting that of all the actors auditioning that day, I was "*by far the most convincing*." Her words. Just before the three-day shoot began, and after I was informed that my character was, in fact, "*pretty important*," as the associate producer described the role—"it's his episode, you're the lead"—which I hadn't even realized until then, similar to the situation with Jim Bowie, I was again faced with a career-altering, possibly life-altering choice. This was for the Discovery Channel. That means it would get national attention, that means I would be seen publicly, and include an IMDb credit, but for doing non-union work, a violation of *Golden Global Rule Number One*. By this time, having already been vested, a SAG pension, that meant I had something to lose. Something substantial. So, what to do? Turn it down? How would I do that? I might not ever get another chance. This might be my only one. Sobering. "*As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a [camera] gangster*." A sobering dilemma. I

decided to handle it just like I did with the AFTRA SNL fiasco, one step at a time. At least I never ended up having to shell out the big bucks to feed those cheap hustlers' coffers, so after some serious deliberation, and frank discussions with a number of my closest peers and colleagues, I grabbed it. The next step before execution (turning in my hard earned card) was to get verification, one way or the other, that going 'ficore', financial core would not impact my pension. Due diligence time. After checking, and rechecking, and checking again, no, it didn't, but it will cost me. Ficore status basically means you resigned from union membership but are still able to work union gigs and earn the same pay as members, union scale or better, '*clearable*' for work as long as the dues were current, but no, if you are already vested with the Producers Pension and Health Plan, that remains intact and unaffected. You will not be able to vote in union elections, run for office, or attend union events, or participate in Foundation events (that one stung) or get the SAG magazine and performance perks, like the free tickets to events and SAG award DVDs etc. No more De Niro invites, you become a '*dues-paying non-member*'.

With the possible exceptions of some film school work, music videos, and early web projects, all the principal television work was done post-ficore. I mean, committing a crime (violating the union golden rule) and leaving public evidence of one's guilt on the internet now, with foreknowledge, is just

a bit crazy. If I learned anything after my lunatic but colorful criminal career, it was that: don't do it if you know you will most likely be caught. Spite, the driver of most if not all my criminal activities, doesn't pay the bills, and there was nothing to spite here. Turning in my card, an honorable withdrawal, was a must. Not only was it ethically sound, but my pension needed protection, so trying to sneak it by might jeopardize it. Forget that. As I saw it, more than ninety-nine percent of the work out there in production land on any given day is non-union, and if I'm going to limit myself to only union projects, and compete for that tiny segment, most of which without representation I don't even have a shot at, and against all the players already there, filling those valuable niches, and without any inside support from someone capable pulling for me? And without anything that special, unique, or creative about me? They already have plenty of my 'type,' and, with all due modesty, I don't bring anything all that industry-shaping new. I got my three notes, my look, voice, and work ethic. That's about it. Okay then, but what's the use of becoming an actor? The idea of becoming an actor is to become an actor. In a word, to act. To act, or not to act? After serious deliberation, extended discussion with multiple informed and involved players, and the due diligence discoveries, it was clearly a must. The losses were a legitimate, painful but necessary cost of business. Goodbye, Foundation. It was great but time to go. Try as I did to talk

them out of it, they weren't willing to make an exception. They kicked me out.

But the tradeoff? On set? Again, surreal. Much of it was exterior shots, day and night, early evening when entire neighborhoods seated on beach chairs across the street, giving us space, watched the production van and trailer, me and the crew, the other cast members doing our thing. The second night, on a busy boulevard in Queens, as I was being escorted in full wardrobe by a PA heading from the trailer to the jewelry store that was about to be hit, a neighborhood guy watching from across the street yelled out, "*Nickey Eyes!*" referring to another wiseguy I must have resembled, as Frank wore thick framed glasses all the time, even in the shower I'm told. It was a rush. All eyes on me. I'm a killer. Most respect me. Everyone fears me. It didn't seem to matter that it was make-believe and I was an actor, not a gangster. And after that? Robbing the jewelry store. The whole neighborhood was watching that one too because the real life location was all lit up behind its big glass front window panes, even the cops were there to make sure no one got confused, this was TV. I never did anything that cool on the rooftops of Ocean Parkway, that's for sure. But now I have. And all that was before the defining moment of death, as the giver, that scene I did on the audition.

The next day we were heading out to Todt Hill, Staten Island, Big Paul Costellano territory to actually shoot it, and my scene partners “Jerry”, the target, and “Wayne”, my top henchman, both just as well cast, meaning not just the right look, but the right everything — energy, charisma, and intent — made it perfect. After the first or second take of that defining shot? The heavily tattooed, lanky, and serious makeup lady came bounding out from behind the monitor after the director called cut to excitedly announce, “*Scorsese!*” That’s all she said. That one word. Everyone understood. It was working, and it was working great.

‘First up’ that day was an early morning exterior, a meeting between Frank and his made guy mentor and childhood pal, Tony Spilotro, performed by another frequent colleague and well-cast actor, Ricky Borgia. It opens with Frank pulling his car into the dusty yard of a Chicago suburb concrete factory (shot in Brooklyn), very dramatic driving, on exit spinning out with the 8-cylinder four-door behemoth, creating a mini dust storm, milking the moment for all I could squeeze out of it, but maybe more James Dean than Frank Cullotta—I couldn’t resist. He gets out and enters Tony’s, which was already parked with him waiting inside behind the wheel. There, in the privacy of the front seat behind the tall sheet metal and linoleum fence, the gruesome twosome plotted their next moves, taking over the Las Vegas underworld, backed up by the “*Chicago Outfit*.”

The lady who owned the concrete yard was on hand too, a five-foot-tall tower of Italian-American misanthropy and fury. The beauty-parlor perfect, grandma-aged dynamo either hated life, herself, or just hated us; it wasn't clear, but I gave this quiet, cold-eyed, and sharp-tongued Mafia princess turned Tasmanian she-Devil a wide berth. Apparently, she must have made the agreement with the production company to use her property, including the Todt Hill mansion as a location under some type of duress because she didn't seem at all at ease or at all pleased, taking every opportunity to viciously berate any production team member that ever gave her half an excuse, maybe she didn't like where you were standing, or parked, or wandered momentarily out of sight, including and up to the director, her tone infused with a baked-in nuance of menace, an '*or else*' edge to it. Everybody, even Frank, figured the best thing was to either stay out of her way or, failing that, just humor her.

The murder was brutal; Jerry stumbled forward after the first two or three shots aimed at the back of his head from about four feet behind. I pursued, stalked him, lowering my aim for three more, emptying the chamber. Then it got worse, see the episode, and I was that convincing. What a moment! Worth noting though, after shooting that execution scene in her house (of course she was watching that too, like a hungry hawk looking for a kill, which she got), her whole demeanor towards me instantly changed. That's what turned her on: the

efficient, heartless brutality. Now when she saw me, she showed what looked like admiration, actually bordering on deferential respect. As I passed her, heading down the narrow hallway from the living room to the kitchen, she quickly backed out of my way, though she hadn't even been in it. *"It was out of respect."*



Frank does a jewelry store stick up, shot in Queens, New York

Sometime shortly after it aired, we connected directly. It's not clear exactly how; probably someone in his circle reached out to me online with a link to an upload and an email address for him. I asked him about all those shots to the back of the head not killing Jerry right away. Frank, the retired professional hitman, now scraping by hustling Las Vegas 'mob tours', explained they were 'half-shots'—meaning they remove half the gunpowder to lessen the sound, a low-tech silencer, but of course it weakened the blast. He sent me a copy of his book

and a movie poster from *Casino* (1995), both signed, and I told him if I'm ever out that way again I'd buy him drinks just to shoot the breeze. We spoke about the final scene in the film where Scorsese took dramatic liberties, at least one big one. Frank wasn't involved in the murder of his childhood pal, Tony "*the Ant*" Spilotro, "*Nicky Santoro*" in the film. Marty just wrote it in, and Frank, as a consultant on the film, had to go along with it, but he didn't like it. That's what he told me, it's totally understandable. There was betrayal, but according to all reports, it was initiated by the Ant. His honesty and humility were enough to make me like him, unlike some other allegedly reformed hoods and wiseguys who still like to play either semi-righteous victim or misunderstood neighborhood folk hero. Frank, perhaps was not quite crooked enough to be a gangster's gangster, and all the cold-blooded ruthlessness that commitment demands, told it like it was, ugly. A wasted life, doing harm wherever he went, including while in behind bars. According to Frank, one time on set Joe Pesci jokingly referred to him as "*a rat*" or "*the rat*." With that, Frank waited until they wrapped for the day, then approached the movie star alone and calmly told him: "*If you ever call me that again, I'm going to tear your eyeball out of your head. Do I make myself clear, Joe?*" As for me though, the best part? Not only was I leaving another colorful mark on my record and actually getting paid for it, but I wasn't going back to jail for it either! Thank you guys, *grazie paesanos*, Angela, Liz, Frank and Lord Dionysus! I finally made my bones on national TV.

A ‘type’ formed, a definite type o’ situation here: we need an actor with a strong camera presence who can look and perform as the ‘*villain*’—a “*sleazy*” record label guy, a damn near satanic big record company boss, a (corrupt) police commissioner, an unhinged father, a ‘*suspicious character*,’ a loquacious professional assassin, a (‘*racist*’) beat cop, or maybe just a ‘*usual suspect*’. It can sometimes work the other way too, ‘*good cop*’, not just *bad* (Jim Bowie, or a nineteenth century abolitionist preacher), but you get the idea. Whatever, if it works and I can do it, and the material is decent enough, not something I’m going to be ashamed of, sure, why not? Charlton Heston, let’s face it, I’m not.

One busy fall afternoon, I’m strolling home from the Hell’s Kitchen area after buying some Chinese take-out at the place a half block from the local precinct house, Midtown South. Just in front of me by about five yards is this plainclothes detective, he’s thirty-something, close to my complexion and build. I see the gun and shield on his belt; otherwise, he’s in low-key business attire, probably headed to the coffee and bagel place on the corner. I feel admiration and envy, fueling a dimly glowing and ugly ember of self-pity. That would have been me. That’s what I would have wanted to be—a cop, a cool guy, a do-gooder with a gun, fighting for the right, delivering justice, and it will never be. “*Didn’t you learn the first time?*” Nope. Not in this life.

Just as I was entertaining those unfriendly and unwanted thoughts and emotions, my cell phone goes off. It's a downtown production company for one of the hit crime recreation shows shooting the next day. They need a last-minute replacement detective for tomorrow because the actor they already cast bailed. Sure. Great. I hadn't even submitted; they had me in their go-to files. Cool, flattering. I'm known. Gigs are coming to me. What time? When? Let's roll; a decent enough consolation prize, art imitating life, I'll take it. Seriously, a national TV gig, more pennies from Heaven and another mark. Dionysus was lookin' out, so I dropped the self-pity of the past and replaced it with an embrace of optimism for tomorrow.

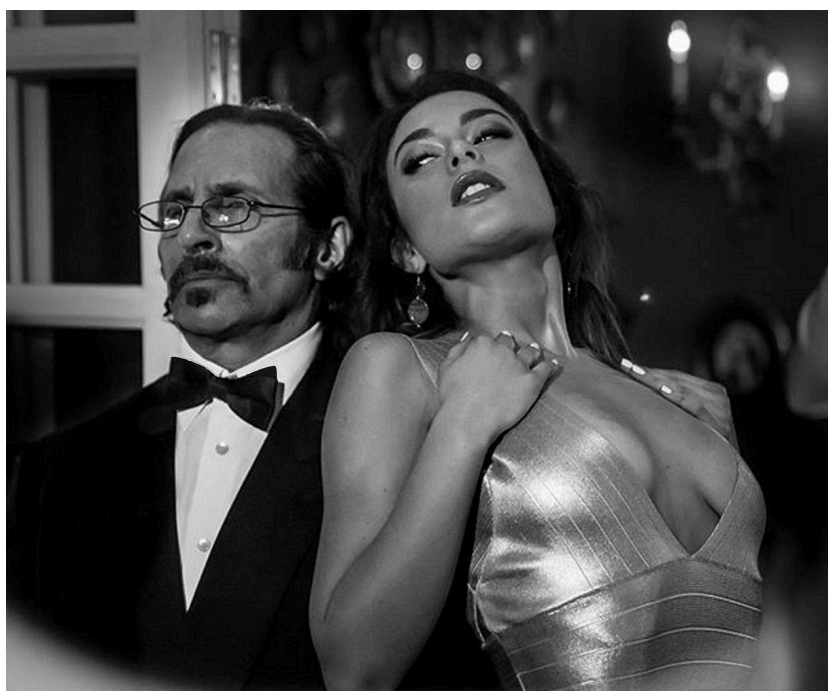
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They told her to find a '*Joe Pesci type*' for their music video — a guy who can play a local neighborhood mafia boss convincingly. They want a compact, dangerous-looking man, someone who can bring authenticity to that role. That's all they told her, the chick handling the casting for the Italian production team. Her name was unfamiliar to me, maybe new to the New York scene, but somehow she got mine, my picture and contact info. She might have seen some of my work or heard about me from another casting director or filmmaker; I

didn't ask, but the 'brand' was out there; she caught it and made the call.

All she said was that it's going to be at a Harlem barbershop this coming Saturday afternoon and all I'd have to do is sit there and look the part; it'll take about an hour and a half, and they have \$150 for me. Easy work. Deal? Plus, to sweeten the pot, the scene's alongside some very well-known hip-hop world talent. It was so flattering just getting that call; I'd have agreed to almost anything. The idea that I would be cast at that level without even an audition, by reputation alone, wowed me. That's not merely flattery. That's confidence. They're putting me in the game right away, starting line-up.

It wasn't the first time either, momentum seemed to be developing on its own, like that detective gig, and another recent music video introduced by Snoop Dogg himself. That girl, Kendra the star, she cast me right off Backstage, no audition, no nothing, just the offer, call time and location, and that three-part Batman film from the young, Brooklyn dude I met at Cannes. Good stuff too, right? As I was about to learn though, every step forward as you ascend gets steeper, ever more challenging, the expectations rise along with it, and this one turned out to be the most challenging so far. Was I really at the pro level? All three notes? Well? They thought so.



“Rude” (2018) with the lovely Kendra Black

That Saturday afternoon, just before call time at 2PM, I show up outside the barber shop on Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard in central Harlem. A truck and production van are already parked outside the location and being unloaded, while the cast and crew are beginning to arrive and check in with their respective departments. I don't know anybody here; it's an Italian production company and I never even met the casting director who called me, or even heard of the artist, Jadakiss, but the scene is familiar; anybody whose hands aren't full moving, or assembling equipment, or running around with a clipboard wearing headphones asking questions, is milling about introducing themselves. So within a short time, the entire team—about twenty people—knows who everyone else is and where we all fit.

There's another guy, Greg, a seasoned black actor about my age, who introduces himself. He's playing the barber, Richie's partner in crime and man on the scene, and I'm playing Richie "Monday" Castello, the wiseguy who always collects on Mondays. So far, cast-wise, it's only the two of us, except for the lead. Right away we begin small talk about the shoot, trading information. *Where'd you buy the coffee? How'd she get your name? Did you take the 'A' or the 'C'?* A moment or two later, another dude, another black guy, younger, early thirties, greets both of us and introduces himself as Cliff, the director. We shake hands, sip coffee, and share smiles for about 60 seconds of similar shop-talk chit-chat, Cliff dug "When They Were Kings" too, until he mentions "*the script*". *Script?* Greg and I look at each other, faces dropped, then at him: "*Script? What script? No one said anything about any script*". There was a miscommunication, big time, but okay, fine. The show must go on. Show biz.

The pit crew chief at the Indy 500—Cliff gets on the two-way radio to one of his ADs and tells them to print up and bring him two copies of the three-page script right away. We'll have about forty-five minutes to learn it because by then, the set will be ready, Jadakiss will be here, and we start shooting. We only have this place for about two hours, so get going. The show must go on. Okay. Pressure on. There was a script to learn, and learn it quick, so we both went at it, attacking it just like the pros we were supposed to be: pacing up and down the

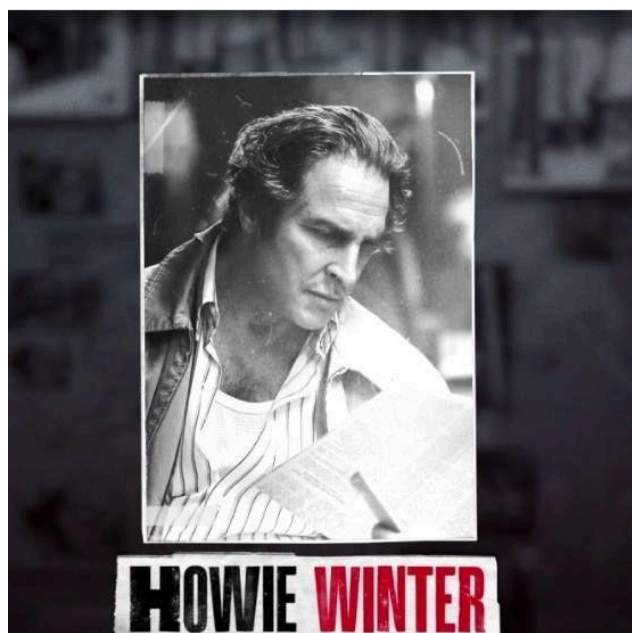
sidewalk outside the shop, reading and repeating the lines out loud, shouting cues back and forth to each other from opposite sides of the block—all ‘A-game,’ everybody, work, work, work, drill it in and get it down, every line, any blocking, every beat, and every direction. Now.

As soon as the man himself arrived in his space shuttle-looking powder blue and white BMW coupé, accompanied by his middle-aged, no nonsense, blonde female associate in business attire (clearly not eye-candy), everyone took their positions inside the shop and started final rehearsing as the tech crew finished up the lights, mics, and camera settings. The three of us, now joined by a fourth—a trim, older black dude noticeably well-dressed in a dignified gray and white pin-striped three-piece, a Harlem legend in his own right, *Dapper Dan* (as if you couldn’t tell)—doing a silent cameo, ran it like a broken record, top to bottom, again and again, back and forth like the Yankees infield warming up before the first pitch.

Minutes later, all departments signaling ‘ready - ready’ - an AD called “*Quiet on set,*” then a beat or two after that Cliff calls out the cue: “Ready on action. *Action!*” and rolling, rolling on we go! Unsurprisingly, Jadakiss had his lines down in like thirty seconds, only about three but precisely timed short sentences; he’s a man of words. Me and Greg? We drove that ball all the way home, a grand slam. Killed it. All four of

us. And to this day, well, yup, I left a mark there too, me, Richie “*Monday*” Castello, a camera-gangster.

“You stupid, fuckin’ piece of shit.”



That might be the only time an ad-libbed line like that, thrown in as a sudden coda to a dialogue at the end of a callback audition with the director, ever helped an actor book the gig. But you heard it here, folks; it happened to me, erupting, unplanned, and unfiltered from

somewhere in this camera-gangster’s darkest, thespian soul.

The last time young, blonde Barbara called, several years back, another casting director I registered with during her first open session, I was on the Atlantic coast of France, in a leafy, sandy surfer town called Hossegor, eating a great, great hamburger—truly a memorable one, one of the best I ever had, washed down with some ice-cold, smoky local stout—so I was unable to take the gig, which was union background

work anyway, another extra-gig. I would have taken it just not to say ‘no’ to her, but as the logistics were what they were, it was basically moot. The shoot was in the next day or two, and I wasn’t scheduled to be back stateside until a week later. Her last words to me at the end of that call were to the effect of don’t worry, I’ll get you something better, and here it was. She kept her word; this call was for a real gig, and it was a lead.

The *History Channel* was doing a four-part mini-series featuring four men of dark renown and notorious fame in the criminal underworld, not just run-of-the-mill local gangsters or merely colorful characters—these men were bosses, the alpha dogs, and thus the title, *Kingpin*. The series would be shooting in Bogota, so a passport was required, four segments over four weeks, divided up evenly like that. If I was willing and able, I should come in next Tuesday at 10AM and be prepared to read for the role of Howie Winter, the boss of the Winter Hill Gang of Irish Boston, boss of the infamous James “Whitey” Bulger, the episode’s featured ‘kingpin’. Man, oh, man, was I on that. Combining my life’s greatest pastimes, passions, and pleasures—traveling and playing tough guy for the camera? Doing my gangster fantasy thing without any real-world repercussions? Getting paid instead of getting locked up, beat up, or worse? Are you watching me, Mom-Mom? Yes, Barbara, I told her. I’m willing. Absolutely. Have passport, will travel, and thank you for the call. As an actor, and a travel junkie on his fifth or sixth passport, this one

niche I can make. See you next Tuesday, and with that we were on our way.



"You stupid, fucken piece of shit." - bigrobtheactor as Howie Winter

It's a low-key restaurant scene, Howie's meeting up with "*Whitey*" for maybe the first time, as he had just been released from Alcatraz and was presenting himself to Howie for work, a meeting of the criminal minds. The only adjustment she suggested at the audition was to hear a little more Boston Irish accent in my voice, so we did it again, I turned it up, and she lit up. Very pleased. I mean, that's her job, bringing the director as many good options as time will allow, and she just bagged another; it was on tape. That was it, and it played right to my strength. It wasn't Shakespeare or Arthur Miller, but pretty much a straightforward discussion with the usual air of sinister gangster innuendo and gallows humor.

The audition was inside the legendary Actors Studio, and the spirits of all the greats that preceded me—Pacino, Hackman, Brando, even Marilyn Monroe—fueled the confidence that played out in my performance. Even when the camera did a full body shot, bottom to top, my shoes were just right, expensive loafers I almost never wore, with the right shine, not too glossy, understated and expensive. Howie's no show-off. He's all about money and respect. It felt so great, so confident that when I walked out, I hoofed it over to the Diamond District and tried on a few vintage Rolexes, including an eighteen karat one, solid, watch and bracelet. Man, I felt great; like I could bring something of real value to people with many, many options. Nothing beats that, a player among players in a rarefied realm, the commercial arts. Whether I booked it or not, I definitely delivered.

About a week later, someone from her office called to set up a Zoom callback with the director and sent me the same scene as sides for the follow-up audition. After we locked it in—date and time—they must have reminded and reconfirmed with me three or four times in a week, right up until the day before, making certain I wouldn't forget or get confused. There was no chance of that, but I humored them. It was the History Channel, a big account, so let's all be on point. 'A-game' only, please. Naturally.

At the designated date and time, as soon as we connected, Rick Lopez, a former seasoned D.P. now transitioning to project director, helped me get my home lighting set up so both the video and audio were optimum. Then both of us began reading the two-character scene, running it back and forth together—me as Howie, him reading for Jimmy. He may have wanted to run it three or four or more times, only a page and a half, so I patiently and eagerly complied, easing my way into the dialogue more naturally with each run-through, until the last line of what I sensed would be our final go at it, the one that would leave the longest-lasting impression.

For some reason, call it creative license or a daring Dionysian gambit, maybe both, I added a final line not written into the script. Howie's the boss, and he's not so sure how impressed he is with the cocky young ex-con who has just presented a proposal. The dialogue as written leaves the scene ending on a note of ambiguity, which I altered somewhat by waiting a half-beat after Howie Winter's final word, then quietly adding, "*You stupid fuckin' piece of shit*", to which we both cracked up. It's what Howie might have been thinking but didn't say, so I said it for him. I took a huge chance, but it worked. I got it, the scene in its broader context, and Rick got me. At that point, if he had any doubts about casting me, they were buried along with any pretense he might have had about tipping his hand in that direction.

“Okay, Rob. Thanks. We’ll be in touch.” That’s about as positive a response as “Okay, we’d like to book you” as you might ever hope to get at that stage. Once they use the word “book” or “booked,” it’s basically a contract, so they don’t use it unless or until they know it’s a done deal. In this case, that took another anxious week. The two older dames who advised me to *let go* weren’t talking about after a callback. Callbacks ratchet up the tension with a tantalizing opportunity, now within reach and no longer quite so abstract or random, making it much harder to ignore, so I had to live with it. Showbiz again, an actor’s life.

When that call came in from one of Barbara’s staff, it felt like winning the Oscar: *“And the role goes to... Robert Kabakoff!”* amidst the sky-splitting sounds of Gabriel’s horn heralding the great achievement! Skinny, sweet Barbara came through. It’s an all-expenses-paid, one-week, working vacation to Bogota. This would be my second visit to Colombia after risk-laden partying in Medellin a year or two before, narrowly escaping the malevolent clutches of local villains both in and out of uniform, another tale for perhaps another memoir another time. This time, I wouldn’t be a solo stranger in a strange and uncertain land; I’d be part of a team with well-connected locals and carefully selected co-stars, all ‘A-game’ players, heading to the capital city in VIP style to shoot a lead role in a major American network mini-series airing nationally in prime time.

Before heading down there, I had a number of pep talks with myself: *Rob, now, number one: succeed. Do not get into any squabbles, no beefs, no arguments or fights. Leave Kabbo and Al Capone's unhinged protege home. Forget them. You're a pro and they are treating you as such. Rise to the occasion, you've done it before, you will do it again.* In fact, the team was so tight that on the second day after my arrival, while seated in the hair-stylist chair, another team member, an actor I presumed, obviously stewed, intruded on the moment by wrapping his arms around the stylist, then turning my way warned that “*she's mine*”. Rather than get into it with him or make an issue, I humored him and let the moment pass. The next day when I got to set, he was gone, replaced by another actor flown in from New York the night before, similar build, look, and coloring, and they reshot his character's scenes and edited out what they didn't need. Professional, no muss no fuss, all ‘A-game’, just like that, just my speed.

The shoot was smooth, challenging and fun. The food though? Let's not talk about it, New York, spoiled as I am. Rick kept adding lines for my character, at one point, and entire scene, and I kept trying to keep up with him, at one point telling him how flattering it was that he seemed to have all that confidence in me but my range and talent are in new and uncharted territory here, and I don't just mean here in a Bogota auto repair shop beating the ball bag off an underling the dead of a Colombian night, but I'm here to do my best and

hope it works at least as well as Howie and the rest of *The Winter Hill Gang* did until they all ended up behind bars or in the ground.

It appears to have been a success; in fact, our episode was the prime-time season opener, the premiere kick-off. When I got to see it live on TV, along with the rest of the History Channel viewers and subscribers all across the amber waves of grain and fruited plains, seeing my character backhand a challenger in a packed restaurant, knocking him off his chair and onto his ass, while anointed by the narrator as “gangster royalty”—I thought of that second-rate gigolo driving the car-service graveyard shift, alone in the frigid dark, watching the snow gather on the windshield wipers as WBGO kept me from despair. I wondered how to turn myself from a has-been, washed-up, FiveTowns trucker, high school drop-out, and teenage jailbird into a professional New York actor. I thought of Mom-Mom and me watching the *Little Caesar* on Saturday mornings, replacing the stolen Walther PPK she bought me for a prop gun, and I thought to myself, ‘*I think you found a way to make your point, Kabbo. I think you actually hit your mark.*’

Maybe if I had a bit more raw thespian talent, or maybe an earlier start and a thicker skin, I could have taken it even further. Maybe if I stick around long enough, I might still. Then again, maybe not. Aside from the pit stops into crazy

land and occasional eruptions of reckless disregard, my *Arkay Trucking* days were just as satisfying, same with the camp counselor gig, school days, and traveling life—and most paid a helluva lot more too, so there'd be no regret or desire to trade any of them in. Keep the focus forward on what's next, where the puck is going, not where it's been.



Either way then, and no matter any of the could've and would've and should'ves, like us professional actors say, we always do three auditions: the one we're going to do, the one we did, and the one we should have done. While I never won an Emmy, or an Oscar, or a Tony, one look at my IMDb page or bank statement reflecting

every pension check deposited, it's confirmed, and with that, an American dream realized in the land of opportunity—an opportunity to take any shot you choose, then with a little luck and a lot of dedication put to practice, you just might end up being exactly what you is.

Epilogue

Far be it for a pretentious chap like me to eschew dropping yet another name, and this one can't be avoided because the fit is so precise. "*A life unexamined is not worth living*," advised the late and great Socrates. These three epic *memoiric* manifestos, in large measure intend to serve that noble and exalted purpose, essentially an attempt at staking a reasonable claim to some manner of actual existence: this is who I am, and these are my experiences. That's it. Added to the record, an '*I memoir, therefore I am*' kind of thing, and in process, the examination.

One more name well worth including, the iconic George Orwell. In his 1984 classic, he describes how once *the Party* eliminates a rebel, they then go through all the records of his ever having existed and eliminate them as well, beginning with a record of birth, right on through execution, so ultimately, whatever he went through was laid totally waste, vanished without a trace, not even a memory; every success, failure, life touched, shot missed, chance taken, love lost, love found, rejection, celebration, tragedy, moment of light, perfect catch, fist thrown, bloody defeat, and surprise victory, all of it, a big, fat, meaningless zero, Roy Batty's "... *tears in the rain*."

That harrowing prospect left an indelible impression, thus another function aims at confronting and challenging that nihilistic notion. I existed, I had these experiences, I recorded these memories and impressions to last as long as they might and for whatever ancillary purposes they might or might not serve, just another guy on the bus, now a *vanaprastha* stopped along the beach, gardening in the tropics, trying to keep his seat until the last stop. That's me, and all of it, the good and the not-so-good, products of the author's claim to '*free will*'. No more, nothing less. With that, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for reading, for now and from here, and one last time because it sounds so cool, in *bocca al lupo* and that's a wrap.



